BERSERK
OF GLUTTONY
NOVEL
VI
Written by
Isshiki Ichika
Illustrated by fame

Table of Contents

Table of Contents
Color Gallery
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Table of Contents Page
Chapter 1: The Merchant Town of Tetra
Chapter 2: A Home, Lost
Chapter 3: Zodiac Knights
Chapter 4: The Night Skies of Tetra
Chapter 5: Luna on the Spiritual Plane
Chapter 6: Roxy’s Declaration
Chapter 7: The Journey Continues
Chapter 8: Bullets of Jealousy
Chapter 9: The Old Lanchester Estate
Chapter 10: The Holy Knight LeChoix
Chapter 11: A Reunion by Moonlight
Chapter 12: Back to The Desert of Extinction
Chapter 13: Roxy’s Limit
Chapter 14: Flaming Swords and Holy Beasts
Chapter 15: The Terror of the Beast
Chapter 16: Dean and Fate
Chapter 17: Snow the Oblivious
Chapter 18: Debriefing
Chapter 19: The Majestic Baths of Lanchester
Chapter 20: A Town Ruined
Chapter 21: To the Depths of the City Eater
Chapter 22: The Power of Libra
Side Story: Dean Graphite
Afterword
Creator Profiles
Newsletter

Table of Contents

Color Gallery
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Table of Contents Page
Chapter 1: The Merchant Town of Tetra
Chapter 2: A Home, Lost
Chapter 3: Zodiac Knights
Chapter 4: The Night Skies of Tetra
Chapter 5: Luna on the Spiritual Plane
Chapter 6: Roxy’s Declaration
Chapter 7: The Journey Continues
Chapter 8: Bullets of Jealousy
Chapter 9: The Old Lanchester Estate
Chapter 10: The Holy Knight LeChoix
Chapter 11: A Reunion by Moonlight
Chapter 12: Back to The Desert of Extinction
Chapter 13: Roxy’s Limit
Chapter 14: Flaming Swords and Holy Beasts
Chapter 15: The Terror of the Beast
Chapter 16: Dean and Fate
Chapter 17: Snow the Oblivious
Chapter 18: Debriefing
Chapter 19: The Majestic Baths of Lanchester
Chapter 20: A Town Ruined
Chapter 21: To the Depths of the City Eater
Chapter 22: The Power of Libra
Side Story: Dean Graphite
Afterword
Creator Profiles
Newsletter

The pincer never found its mark. Someone had come between us. They easily blocked the holy beast's pincer with their black spear. As I took in the silhouette before me, I realized it was a person I had long looked up to.
"Dad?!"
"You simply refuse to change, don't you?" he said. "I told you not to do this, but you did it anyway. I'll tell you right now—you get that from your mother."
Dean Graphite knocked the pincer away and turned his head so I could see his profile. His eyes met mine as a sardonic grin spread across his face.
"Can't do anything by yourself, can you?" he said. "But if you can still fight, then follow me."

There was palpable joy in Eris's voice as she threw her arms around me. I still couldn't see a thing because of Roxy's hands, but I felt the softness of Eris's body as it pressed into me.
"Well, good night then!" said Eris.
"No! Wake up! Get dressed!"
Roxy pushed against my eyes with more force. Meanwhile, it seemed that Memil had decided to bite into my arm.

BERSERK OF GLUTTONY

NOVEL

VI

WRITTEN BY
ISSHIKI ICHIKA

ILLUSTRATED BY
FAME

Seven Seas Entertainment

BOSHOKU NO BERUSERUKU
-OREDAKE LEVEL TO IU GAINEN WO TOPPA SURU - VOL. 6

©Ichika Isshiki
Illustrations by fame

This edition originally published in Japan in 2019 by
MICRO MAGAZINE, INC., Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with
MICRO MAGAZINE, INC., Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Hengtee Lim
ADAPTATION: Veles Svitlychny
COVER DESIGN: H. Qi
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: Brennan Thome
PROOFREADER: Meg van Huygen
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: E.M. Candon
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori
PRINT MANAGER: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-63858-228-1
Printed in Canada
First Printing: May 2022
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

BERSERK OF GLUTTONY

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 The Merchant Town of Tetra .....

CHAPTER 2 A Home, Lost .....

CHAPTER 3 Zodiac Knights .....

CHAPTER 4 The Night Skies of Tetra .....

CHAPTER 5 Luna on the Spiritual Plane .....

CHAPTER 6 Roxy's Declaration .....

CHAPTER 7 The Journey Continues .....

CHAPTER 8 Bullets of Jealousy .....

CHAPTER 9 The Old Lanchester Estate .....

CHAPTER 10 The Holy Knight LeChoix .....

CHAPTER 11 A Reunion by Moonlight .....

CHAPTER 12 Back to The Desert of Extinction .....

CHAPTER 13 Roxy's Limit .....

CHAPTER 14 Flaming Swords and Holy Beasts .....

CHAPTER 15 The Terror of the Beast .....

CHAPTER 16 Dean and Fate .....

CHAPTER 17 Snow the Oblivious .....

CHAPTER 18 Debriefing .....

CHAPTER 19 The Majestic Baths of Lanchester .....

CHAPTER 20 A Town Ruined .....

CHAPTER 21 To the Depths of the City Eater .....

CHAPTER 22 The Power of Libra .....

SIDE STORY Dean Graphite .....

Chapter 1:
The Merchant Town of Tetra

NOT LONG AFTER departing for the south from the Kingdom of Seifort, the merchant town of Tetra came into view. As far as mounts went, these motorbikes were exceptionally swift. I finally understood what Greed meant when he claimed that they harnessed the power of a hundred horses—in half a day, we had covered what would have taken two full days on horseback.

Roxy rode on the back of my motorbike, humming pleasantly. Soon, we would break for lunch. Climbing off our bikes, we looked out at the town of Tetra before us.

"It's as lively as usual," I said.

"It is, isn't it? This *is* the center of trade for the southern realms, after all," Roxy said. "Oh, look over there! How cute!"

She pointed to a busy outdoor stall displaying a variety of ornaments and accessories. Roxy loved looking at that kind of thing. When she had been a holy knight, she'd made a point of not wearing many accessories, so she'd simply taken pleasure in window shopping. Now that she'd relinquished her position as head of the Hart family, returning it to her father, she was just another traveling swordsman. She had decided this so that she could travel by my side. I couldn't believe she'd do such a thing, but at the same time, nothing could have made me happier.

"What's on your mind, Fay? You're smiling." Roxy tilted her head, bird-like, and walked up to me. Recently, I felt like we'd become closer than we'd ever been.

"Huh? Oh, no, it's nothing." My thoughts must have been written all over my face. I heard Greed grumbling about how I had let my guard down, but I ignored him. "Seeing as we've come all this way, can I buy you something?" I didn't have to worry about money anymore, especially compared to when I was a mere servant. Now I could buy Roxy anything at any of the stalls we looked at. However, Roxy shook her head.

"This is more than enough for me," she said, taking out the pendant hidden in her shirt and showing it to me. I had given her the jewel set in that pendant long ago. "I love looking at all the stalls and their accessories, but I don't want anything for myself."

"Okay."

As Roxy and I looked at each other, I felt an icy gaze piercing me from behind. Roxy seemed to feel it too, and we both turned toward the source.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt the obviously special moment you two are sharing, but can we talk about lunch yet?" Memil said, not sorry at all.

"Yeah, I'm starving. Can you save your lovey-dovey stuff for later?" Eris added.

They stared at us with eyes devoid of any feeling whatsoever. Before we could reply, they went on.
“I thought the four of us were traveling as a party, but it feels a *lot* like the two of you are on your own little honeymoon,” said Eris.
“You’re exactly right, Your Majesty. They should be ashamed of themselves.”
Roxy and I bowed apologetically. “Sorry…” we chorused.
“By the way, Eris,” I said, “are you sure it’s okay to leave the motorbikes right there on the street like that? Aren’t you worried someone will take them?”
Eris laughed. “Don’t give it a second thought. You need at least 100,000 in your magic stat to get one of these bad boys to move. Not to mention, they’re painted with the royal seal. If you’re going to steal one, you’d better prepare for one hell of a royal punishment.”
“Could you *not* say stuff like that with such a devilish gleam in your eyes?” I asked.
“Sorry, sorry. It’s like I told you before; live as long as I have, and you start to lose touch with these sorts of things.”
I wondered if that really was the case. Myne had once said something similar, and she’d been alive even longer than Eris. Myne had also completely lost her sense of taste, professing that everything tasted the same.
Right now, though, she was somewhere far from us, seeking the mysterious Door to Distant Lands. It was her obsession. Her reason for living.
The Door to Distant Lands… So far, all I knew about it was that it could bring the dead back to life. Through that power, Roxy’s father, Lord Mason, had been able to return despite his death in Galia, as had his soldiers. The Door had even resurrected my own father, and because of some kind of “contract,” he was stronger now than I’d ever known.
But the Door didn’t only bring humans back to life. Ancient monsters once thought extinct were coming back too. They had stats much higher than any ordinary adventurer—stats that put them in the Domain of E. Monsters at this level could only be hurt by others of the same level or stronger; they were impervious to all other harm. The Divine Dragon had been known as the Heavenly Calamity because of this power.
If ancient monsters started running rampant, it would plunge the world spiraling into chaos. We had embarked on this journey to prevent Shin from opening the Door to Distant Lands and avert that disaster. Eris’s partial analysis of the Philosopher’s Stone had told us that Shin was currently hiding somewhere near Hausen on the Barbatos estate. If we could find Shin, we would also find Myne.
I knew what I had to do: find Myne and stop her.
This was much easier said than done. We couldn’t just rush into battle with Myne. I needed to have my body, soul, and mind in total alignment. With her innate martial talents and her astronomical strength, fighting her would

cost us, possibly more than we could afford. We were still a ways from Hausen, but as we drew nearer, my anxieties multiplied.
Roxy must have felt that nervousness drifting from me, because she clasped my hand in her own. “Let’s get some lunch then!” she said. “We all know what Fay is like, so let’s find a place with hearty meat dishes.”
“Yeah… Yeah!” I said. “Something thick and juicy would hit the spot.”
“Well, then, let’s head this way! There’s a tavern a little farther down the road, and I’m told the meat is so tender, it falls off the bone.”
“Sounds fantastic.”
“When I went to Galia on my expedition, Mugan recommended it. It lived up to his promises.”
“That guy knows his food, huh?”
“He’s got a lot of experience under his belt.”
Roxy and I began walking toward the restaurant, but we suddenly felt an icy gaze once again drilling into our backs. Turning, we saw Eris and Memil, their eyes narrowed into slits.

“Have you already forgotten what I said earlier?” asked Eris.
“Insufferable!” cried Memil.
These two… They’re not going to make things easy, I thought. All Roxy and I had done was talk about going to lunch, and even that was too cloying for them!
“Sorry…” Roxy and I echoed.
“Will the two of you ever learn? *Anyway*, we’re going to have meat for lunch, then?”
“That’s correct, Your Majesty, that’s the plan,” said Memil. “However, the bar also serves delicious fish as well as a selection of other delicacies. Tetra is the nexus of trade in the south, so there’s no shortage of interesting ingredients.”
“Delicacies such as…liquor?”
“But of course!”
“Then it’s decided!”
Eris drank like a fish, and she wasn’t a lightweight. On the contrary, a barrel of wine was nothing to her. Literally. When we had gone together to my local tavern for a couple drinks, I’d seen her finish an entire barrel by herself. I doubted that I would ever forget that sight.
“Eris, I’m begging you,” I said, “go easy today. Drink too much and you won’t be able to drive.”
“That’s not a problem; why do you think we brought Memil?”
Memil flashed me an awkward glance. When my adopted sister was put in this kind of situation, she lost her cool and got flustered. Unfortunately, there wasn’t anything she could do. The rules were clear: what the queen says goes.
“As you wish, Your Majesty. I’ll handle the driving, so please relax and enjoy the wide array of beverages on offer.”
“You are simply wonderful, Memil! Just so wonderful!”
Like any good maid, Memil made the needs and desires of her queen her top priority. This pleased Eris greatly. She grinned and gave Memil a pat on the head. Meanwhile, Memil stared at me, despair in her eyes. She had sat behind “Her Majesty” since we left the kingdom, listening to Eris’s chatter the entire time.
The moment the others were distracted, however, Memil bared her fangs at me. She was letting me know that she planned on taking more of my blood later this evening. She’d drunk my blood a few days ago, yet she already wanted more. If it meant that Memil would keep Eris content and out of my hair, I’d be happy to donate. I gave a subtle nod and Memil’s face immediately brightened.
“Let’s get ourselves a feast then!” I said, and the girls cheered with excitement.
I was sure of one thing: I’d better eat my fill if I was going to lose another pint to Memil’s sanguine appetites.

We entered the tavern that Roxy recommended and found it full of raucous diners. There wasn't a single empty table. But this was where Eris's special talents came into play. Her seductive Lust skill soon drew the attention of a few unsavory-looking adventurers, who hopped out of their chairs and practically threw themselves on the ground before her.
"I don't suppose you big boys would be willing to part with your table for us, would you?"
"It would be our pleasure!"
"Oh, you are *so* gracious! Why don't you go kneel down over there and wait quietly until I've finished my meal? I bet you'd love to see what it looks like when I eat."
"Thank you so much! You're much too kind!"
It seemed like the rest of the tavern crowd had no fondness for those adventurers, because they applauded Eris for handling them so deftly.
"Well," Eris said, "I found us an empty table. Shall we?"
"I am never going to get used to seeing you do that," I said. "It's terrifying."
"Don't knock it until you try it for yourself. I'm always ready for you, Fate."
"Stop! Stop that! You'll only make my nose bleed again, and I don't need that while I'm eating!"
"More's the pity… But I'll be free all evening, so just say the word, okay?"
Eris's wink sent a shiver down my spine as the painful memories of her mental endurance training once again flashed through my mind. Even now, I could hardly believe that I had resisted her charms as well as I did. By the time our meal arrived, I had broken into a cold sweat.
Eris ordered fish, but the rest of us chose meat dishes. I went with the kingdom's traditional beef steak, while Roxy and Memil decided on bowls of creamy stew with herb-stuffed chicken. A waitress set down a plate holding a huge grilled fish, the flesh still vibrant even after being cooked.
"Think you can eat all that by yourself?" I asked Eris.
"Without a doubt! I also intend to indulge in this tavern's finest wines!"
Eris clapped her hands and waitresses arrived bearing bottles of wine, which they placed around her plate. It was like Eris was all set to have a celebratory banquet.
"Perfect! Can I talk you into sharing a glass with me, Fate?"
"Not today. I've got stuff to do later, and I don't want to drink beforehand."
"Oh? Where are you off to?"
"Visiting some old graves. There's something I need to check for myself. But I'll be back by evening."
"I see. Such a pity. How tragic, a girl like me drinking all by her lonesome…" Eris muttered as she drained her first glass of wine. "Roxy and Memil don't drink either… What's a girl to do?"
It looked like she had settled on having a one-woman drinking party.
It had been a while since Roxy and Memil last had the opportunity to dine outside of Seifort, so they were both in high spirits. They tore off chunks of

bread to enjoy with their bowls of stew. They agreed it was excellent, and they speculated on what other foods they wanted to eat.
This journey seemed like a good opportunity for the two of them to get to know each other. The Hart and Vlerick families had been opposed in the past, but Roxy and Memil had discarded those old grudges and begun a new friendship.
So went my thoughts as I cut a slice of steak and shoveled it into my mouth. I didn't want my food to get cold.
"Mmmm!"
It was grilled to perfection, bursting with juicy flavor! The taste was so good, it put me on cloud nine! As I blissfully devoured my steak, seated beside my hard-drinking queen, an adventuring party entered the tavern. At a glance, the adventurers looked tough. They were equipped with good gear, probably high level. Noticing that no tables were free, they sauntered over toward me.
"Oi. You. Yeah, you with the pretty little servant girls. We're hankering for some grub, so why don't you just give us your seat and make yourself scarce?"
Another one of the adventurers laughed. "Yeah, what he said."
"Get out of here, you third-rate wannabe."
It was clear they wanted me gone so they could dine with my traveling partners. Little did they know what they were getting themselves into. I was reminded once more that a little knowledge went a long way, and a lack of it could land you in a world of hurt. I thought it best if I warned them as politely as possible.
"I wouldn't do that if I were you," I said. "Seriously. The safest thing you could do right now is keep your mouths shut, got it?"
"Huh?! How dare you speak to me like that?! Do you have any idea who we are?"
"And what if I turned the question back at you? Look, I'm just giving you a friendly warning."
The adventurer snorted derisively. "Tough guy, huh? If you think you've got what it takes, prove it."
The moment he finished speaking, all three of the women at the table stood. Roxy was not one to stand for such brazen attempts at bullying. Meanwhile, Memil was eager to let off some steam after having been at Eris's beck and call all day. Finally, Eris didn't care to have dumb adventurers interrupt her one-woman drinking party. As for me? To be honest…I just couldn't think of a way to stop what happened next.
Eris smiled and beckoned toward the adventurers. "Well, if you're going to be that insistent, I'd be happy to play with you."
"Ha, for real? It's my lucky day, boys!"
"But not here. We wouldn't want to disturb the diners now, would we?"
"You heard her, boys! And as for you, you third-rate wannabe, I hope your steak still tastes as good after it's seasoned with tears of loneliness!"

The group of adventurers excitedly followed Eris out of the tavern. In less than a minute, Eris, Roxy, and Memil returned to their seats.
Eris breathed a sigh of relief. “Those guys were a complete pain in the ass.”
“Indeed,” said Roxy. “To think there are still adventurers roaming the lands with such poor manners.”
“They were just what I needed!” Memil cried happily. “Let’s eat!”
Eris and Roxy grinned and nodded. They resumed eating and talking as if nothing had happened. On the other hand, I felt like my steak had lost its flavor. I had tried to warn those guys. Really, I had. I *told* them not to interrupt the meal, that it was too dangerous, but they didn’t listen.
Then my thoughts wandered to Myne and the way she used to get angry in almost exactly the same way. This was a clear reminder that I accompanied a group of extraordinarily powerful, supremely capable young women.

Chapter 2:
A Home, Lost

WE WERE UNANIMOUS: Eris had to rest up back at the inn. She was totally plastered after all that wine. I had been unable to enjoy my delicious steak because she couldn't stop drunkenly throwing herself at me. She was a real handful even when she was sober, but she became even worse when she drank. She kept getting between Roxy and me, and it all made eating lunch a real struggle. We tasked Memil with carrying Eris back to the inn. After all, her job in the party was to play support.

"Take care of Eris," I said.

"Is this something I'm capable of accomplishing on my own, though? I'm brimming with anxiety," Memil groaned, shifting her weight.

"You'll be fine."

"I'm glad you trust me, but…your confidence is entirely unfounded. Please come with me, Master."

"I told you at lunch, Memil: there's something I have to check out. So I need you to keep an eye on Eris until I come back."

"You're leaving me on my own?!"

"I am."

Memil kept trying to find a way to come along with me, but she was wasting her time—I wasn't going to take her. She narrowed her eyes, irritated…and yearning for my blood. Eris, meanwhile, sang merrily as she leaned on Memil's shoulder for support.

"Eris!" I said. "I'm going to be gone for a little while. Try to sober up while I'm gone, okay?"

"Okay! Sir, yes, sir! I hear you loud and clear!" she bellowed, holding Memil tight, three sheets to the wind. "I'll be right here waiting! Until then, I'll keep the good times rolling with Memil. To think I wasted all that time trying to snare you and you wouldn't even glance in my direction. Memil! We must overcome this loneliness! Are you with me?!"

Memil squealed in surprise. "I don't know if that's a good idea, Your Majesty!"

"I get to decide what's a good idea!" Eris slurred.

"Your Majesty, what are you doing?! Watch where you put your hands! Master, help! Your sister needs you!"

"Uh… Good luck, Memil…"

With that said, I turned my back and walked away as Memil's cries for help echoed behind me.

Roxy, silent this whole while, turned to face me. "Are you sure she'll be okay? She looks to be in quite a spot."

"Well, there's nobody else we can rely on to look after Eris. So she'll just have to grit her teeth and bear it."

Memil could be relied upon because she had a fragment of Shin embedded within her, making her immune to the allure of Eris's Lust skill. When Eris drank too much, she occasionally became something of a flirting maniac. It was out of control. At times like this, only Memil could handle her.
Roxy still felt guilty, so I suggested an alternative: "You could babysit Eris instead, if it bothers you so much."
"But…" Roxy looked chagrined; this wasn't like her.
As I climbed onto the driver's seat of the motorbike, I asked, "What's wrong, Roxy?"
"Her Majesty, she… She always gives me these *looks*."
"Oh? Is that bad?"
"You're a bit oblivious about this sort of thing, so I haven't told you, but… sometimes when I'm with you, I can feel her eyes boring into me."
"Do you think she's mad at you?"
"It doesn't feel like *anger*…"
Roxy couldn't put the feeling into words. Eris's past was a mystery. All I knew was that she'd been saved by the former bearer of the Gluttony skill. But I hadn't found that out from her; one of her white knight bodyguards had told me. I got the impression that Eris didn't want to talk about it. Perhaps she didn't have many fond memories of that time. I knew the feeling. We had at least that in common. I decided that the next time we drank together, we'd have a proper chat.
Roxy hopped on the back of the motorcycle as I charged it with some magic. I weaved the bike through the crowds as we cruised slowly down the street. Every eye in the crowd followed me and this four-thousand-year-old artifact, once thought lost. Nobody had ever seen anything like it, and their curiosity was written plainly on their faces. Tetra was a town of merchants and markets, so it was only natural that expensive magitech would catch the eyes of traders. However, as soon as they noticed the royal seal emblazoned on the motorcycle, they bowed in reverence. Some people even got down on their knees.
It was just like Eris said: The ruler of the kingdom stood above all else. Too bad she also spent her days trying to cause me grief with her wiles…
"These motorbikes cause quite the scene, don't they?" said Roxy.
"Well, not only is it a rare piece of tech, it also carries the royal seal. No way we could stay low-key in a place like this."
"So you're telling me that we've got no choice but to just get used to it?"
"Exactly. But at least we're clear of the crowds now. I'm going to pick up the pace, so hold on tight!"
"Roger!"
The best thing to do was to put those crowds behind us. Wind whipped through our hair as we rode out of Tetra and to the west, toward my old hometown. I needed to see something there with my own eyes.
Roxy gripped my waist tighter. "Your village was burned down by gargoyles, wasn't it?"

“Yeah, back during my first trip to Galia. I stopped by, and…well, I got entangled in more than I expected.”
“I see… Would you tell me about it? The time you went back home?”
“It’s not a very nice story, to be honest.”
“I don’t mind. I want to hear it.”
From the sound of her voice, I knew that I didn’t have a choice. So, I regaled her with those old memories as we rode toward the village I’d once called home.
It had all started when I ran into the village elder’s son, Set, in Tetra. He had gone there hoping to find some foolhardy adventurers to rid the village of monsters. However, there was no shortage of monster-hunting quests in Tetra, and Set hadn’t had the money to make a good offer.
A long time ago, Set had been one of the people who drove me out of the village, and I’d still harbored a grudge. However, five years had passed, and I’d wanted to pay my respects at the graves of my parents, so I took his job.
“Set had lost his wife and was raising his daughter by himself,” I said. “It had changed him. Leaving the village and seeing the outside world had changed him too. He wasn’t the guy he once was.”
“I see. And now Set is helping with the restoration of Hausen, correct?”
“Yeah, he’s a key part of the forces building the place into something new.”
In the end, the night I returned home had also been the night of a fierce gargoyle attack. Before I knew it, more than half the village was gone. I decided then and there to protect Set and his daughter at all costs. In the aftermath of that battle, the village was reduced to rubble. The gargoyle’s fire magic incinerated everything, the air choked with ash.
“I’m sorry to hear that,” Roxy said. “But at least you managed to patch things up with Set in the end.”
“Yeah… He asked me to punch him, actually. He said, ‘I want you to hit me. I know it won’t make up for everything that happened.’ I think it was symbolic for him.”
“What?! And did you?”
“Well, not at full strength. I didn’t want to kill him, so I only gave him a light tap. He went barreling across the ground, but…he grinned like an idiot the whole way.”
That smile had reminded me of my father. It was just how he’d smiled whenever he wanted to cheer me up during my childhood. When I saw that smile on Set’s face, I felt like I had made peace with my past.
“I’m so glad to hear it. It ended up good for you too.”
“Yeah, if we hadn’t been able to put the past behind us, Hausen wouldn’t be where it is now. It really made me appreciate the power of human connection…Our experiences bound us together, and those feelings don’t fade no matter how great the distance.”
“I feel exactly that way about you, Fay.”
“Roxy…thank you.”
“You’re most welcome.”

Roxy hugged me tight, as though she wanted to make sure she didn't fall off the speeding motorbike. I was surprised, but the sincere bond between us brought a smile to my face. We rode on until the burned remains of my old village came into view.

The village was long abandoned. With enough time, as weeds and grass reclaimed the roads, it would become indistinguishable from the wilderness. I got off the bike and took a look around.

"It's like the place is frozen in time," I said. "Frozen in the aftermath of a gargoyle attack."

"I wanted to come see your village with my own eyes, but…I never imagined it would be in such a state." Roxy stood quietly by my side, her face apologetic. All I could do was hold her hand. "I know where you're going, but…will you be okay?" she asked.

"I'll be fine. It's the reason I'm here. The reason I came back."

We continued on toward my old home, which was located a short distance away from the village proper. Left unattended, the spring sun welcomed new tenants—tall grass and weeds. Had the chill of winter left sooner, they might even have reached waist height. The house had been razed to the ground, but that hadn't been the work of gargoyles. Rather, it had been the efforts of the villagers themselves; they had set it aflame when they drove me out of the village.

Roxy noticed how these ruins differed from the others. "Fay…"

"It's fine. It was a long time ago."

When I headed around to the back of the house, I would find what I sought. I wanted to see what had come of the graves of my parents. As we neared, we took in the state of the graves. There were two at the back of the house. One remained undisturbed, but the earth before the other was churned up, as if someone had crawled out of it.

"Damn it… Damn it. It… It really was him."

"Just like my father, your father…"

"Came back to life," I said, finishing her sentence. "The person who stole the Philosopher's Stone, the person who had kidnapped Laine, truly was my father."

The dead had returned to life. I knew that for certain now. But only my father had returned. My mother remained in eternal repose. There was some reason, some factor, that decided who came back to life and who didn't, but I had no idea what it was. At this point I could only speculate. Nonetheless, I felt confident that I would get closer to finding an answer on our journey to Hausen.

I didn't know why my father had taken the actions he had, save that he said they were part of a "contract." The way he'd said that word had been filled with portent. That's why when I returned to my home village, I'd hoped to find some sort of clue. Kneeling beside my father's grave, I spotted a holy pendant half-buried in the loose dirt.

“There’s some kind of symbol carved into this,” I muttered, brushing aside the soil.
“I’ve seen that somewhere before, it’s…” Roxy yelped in surprise when recognition hit. “That’s the holy symbol of the god Laplace, once used by an ancient faith,” she stammered, perplexed. “The religion has largely faded into obscurity, so there are very few followers of Laplace left, but it seems like your father was one of those faithful.”
“When I was young, we prayed together every morning. I never realized we were praying to Laplace…”
“But look. It seems this belongs to a Zodiac Knight. They were very high-ranked.”
“A Zodiac Knight?”
“I’m no expert, but I read an old tome in our manor’s library about Laplace. There was an illustration of a pendant just like this one alongside a picture of the Zodiac Knights. A long time ago, before the kingdom was established, they held great power. So much so that they were called descendants of God. I don’t know why, but when the Laplace religion declined at some point, the Zodiac Knights disappeared along with it.”
“And now they only exist in old stories?”
“Yes. How did your father come to possess this pendant?”
When it came to my father’s past… I had no clue. This pendant was potentially important. Placing it carefully in my pocket, I spent some time tidying the two graves, flattening the disturbed earth and pulling weeds. With Roxy’s help, we finished more quickly than I expected.
“Thank you, Roxy.”
“Think nothing of it, Fay. I’m simply glad I could finally meet your parents.”
“Well, one of them was truant, unfortunately.”
“Then I’ll just have to meet him in person.”
“And when that time comes, I’ll be right there with you.”
I was glad to have Roxy by my side. However, I realized that Greed had remained strangely quiet during this whole trip. I wondered if, in his own way, he was giving me space to process my feelings in this quiet moment. If so, I was grateful for it.
I had made an important decision when I dueled Aaron, and as I stood before this empty grave, I grew sure that it was the right decision.
“Dad, the next time we meet…it will be in battle,” I said.
My heart was at peace with the decision. We left the graves and returned to Tetra.
When this is all over, I thought, I’ll be back…Mother.

Chapter 3:
Zodiac Knights

THERE WERE THE THINGS you didn't know and the things you didn't *want* to know. When faced with both at once, you could only feel bewildered. Even after I returned to Tetra, I felt adrift on just such a sea of uncertainty. Roxy and I parted ways at our respective lodgings. She looked worried, a small frown on her face. Still, she entered her room without a word, perhaps understanding that I needed some time alone. I walked the main street of Tetra as I gazed up at the night sky.

"What's got you so bummed?" asked Greed. "You've made up your mind. You're going to fight your father. Why the long face?"

"The fight won't be an issue. I won't back down."

"Then what's eating you?"

"I've realized I don't know anything about my father… I know that he was kind, and that he protected me. Beyond that, he's a total mystery to me."

"You were only a mewling child when you knew him. Children that young can never truly know the burdens their parents shoulder."

"Even so…that night he came home injured, I should have asked him what happened. According to Roxy, the Zodiac Knights were incredibly powerful. If that's true, then what did my father fight that night? I was the person closest to him, and I still didn't know a thing. I always figured that he'd be there to protect me. I was so sure that I never imagined the alternative."

"You think it might have a connection to your skill?"

"I think there's a possibility."

It was said that the history of the founders of the Church of Laplace stretched to a time long before the kingdom. Roxy had told me that old documents dated the religion to an era before the destruction of Galia. A faith with thousands of years of history had now all but vanished. Even the church leadership had vanished for reasons unknown. Without them, each church had become an independent entity. Perhaps this was how the Laplace faith had fallen into obscurity and ruin.

I thought of the church in the kingdom, the one in the slums. The nuns there worked tirelessly to provide succor for the forsaken of Seifort. They were good people who worked themselves to the bone just to raise the kingdom's orphans and give food to the poor. It wasn't a job for the faint of heart, and they deserved great respect.

Now I'd learned that my father, who it seemed shared their faith, was a high-ranking Zodiac Knight. As a child, I recalled him being just as kind as those nuns.

These memories didn't align with the man I had faced in the Military District. Holding a black spear, the tattoo on his face glowing a violent red, his face had contorted strangely as he struggled to smile. That had not been

the face of the man I knew as my father. It was a face I had not seen before. I realized in that moment that I didn't want to know Dean Graphite, the Zodiac Knight. His existence threatened to tarnish my childhood memories of my father—my hero.

"You can feel as disappointed as you want," said Greed, "but you're still leaving here tomorrow. Let's try and turn that frown upside down. Want to grab a drink somewhere?"

I came back to my senses and spotted a tavern sign hanging from a wall. "All right. You know, you really do have some good ideas every now and again."

"Every now and again? Get out of here—all my ideas are good!"

I laughed. "Yeah, yeah. Well, this one is especially good."

I could hear lively voices from outside the tavern. Pushing open the door, I found the interior as raucous as could be. It reminded me of something Roxy had once told me: in times of darkness, find someplace bright. I felt that perhaps this was a place where I could seek a little light.

I looked for an empty seat with no luck. Just as I was thinking of leaving after all, I noticed a young man sitting alone at a large, round table. He caught my eye and smiled. It was such a friendly and familiar gesture that I was convinced he'd mistaken me for somebody else, but he was clearly waving me over. The young man wore a bespoke set of clothes that reminded me of religious vestments.

"Feel free to take a seat here," he said. "I was waiting for some folks, but it seems none of them could make it. Please, don't be shy."

I wasn’t particularly enthusiastic about looking for another tavern, and I was curious about this young man with his gleaming silver hair. I had noticed that he wore a newly familiar pendant around his neck.
“No need to be so shy—not after I’ve invited you to take a seat, Fate Graphite… Or wait. It’s Fate Barbatos now, isn’t it?”
“How do you know my name?”
“Come now, take a seat.” The young man took a flagon of wine from a passing waitress, then picked two glasses from the thirteen lined along the table before him and filled them up. One for me and one for him.
“Help yourself,” he said. “It’s an excellent vintage. They get some wonderful wine here, which I suppose is to be expected, given that it’s such a bountiful trade town. I’d hoped to share some of this with the others, but they’ve left me here waiting.”
I took a seat and eyed him warily. “Before I drink anything, who are you?”
“Right to the point, aren’t you? Like father, like son, I suppose. Very well. As you’ve probably surmised, I’m a Zodiac Knight. The name’s Libra.”
“How do you know my father?”
“War buddies, you could call us. I felt his return and made my way here. Looks like I missed him, though. I hoped that the others might come and share in the fine wine this world has to offer, but alas. That didn’t go to plan either.”
This young man, Libra, knew my father. I opened my mouth to speak again but he raised a hand to silence me.
“That’s enough for now,” he said. “Let’s not spoil this vintage with words. A boy who asks too many questions will only reveal his ignorance to his enemies.”
“You’re the one who invited me.”
“That I did. I wanted to see with my own eyes the face of the son who Dean sacrificed his life to protect. Here, let me tell you one thing.”
Libra pointed to his face, and a red tattoo appeared upon it. It resembled the one my father had, though the pattern was distinctly different.
“This sacred mark is a divine revelation from God. It grants us unbelievable power—power that rivals even the Skills of Mortal Sin. That’s the purpose of this gift, after all.”
I read between the lines: he was implying that in the past, he’d been the enemy of those who’d born skills like mine. Instinctively, I placed a hand on the handle of my black sword.
“I have no intention of fighting you just yet,” Libra chided me. “Though it’s entirely possible things may yet come to that. Funny, isn’t it? To think that the child of a Zodiac Knight would end up bearing a Skill of Mortal Sin. I suppose I see why he deserted the church.”
“What do you mean?”
“What I said. When Dean’s wife became pregnant, they ran off, and they ended up in a place you know all too well. She gave birth, then died. They had run for so long, her body must have reached its limits.”

I had been about to unsheathe the black sword, but Libra's words stopped me in my tracks. My hand fell to my side.
This was a truth I hadn't wanted to know. I had always assumed that my Gluttony skill had been identified *after* the skill appraiser visited our village. But that seemed not to be the case. If I took Libra at his word, then his tale implied that my parents had known of my skill even before I was born. Was such a thing even possible?
I'd never heard of anyone divining a person's skill before birth. A skill appraiser couldn't detect the skills of a child still nestled within their mother's body. Attempting to do so would only reveal the skills of the mother.
My father had told me that bearing the burden of Gluttony had been mere coincidence—bad luck. But if he had known that I would have it before I was even born…then the skill couldn't have been the product of happenstance. If it was inevitable that I would be born with Gluttony…then had I somehow been given the skill in *order* to be born with it? By what means? Skills were supposedly a divine gift. Did this mean that something in existence rivaled the power of the gods?
"What do you know about my skill?" I asked.
"At the very least, I know more than you do."
I narrowed my eyes at Libra, unable to contain the anger simmering within me. He simply grinned and drank from his glass of wine.
"Yours is a life your parents tried very hard to treasure and protect," he said. "I would advise you to end your journey here. I'm sure that's what your father would want too."
"Is that a threat?"
"It's advice. You're the son of a brother-in-arms. I would hate for your Gluttony to consume you while you're still so young. I'd rather not see you turn into a monster and fight Dean either. From what I can see, you're already nearing the end of your rope."
I glared at him, gritting my teeth.
"In any case, I'm sure we'll run into each other again somewhere soon."
With that, Libra stood and exited the tavern. He left behind the glass of wine he had poured for me and the twelve empty glasses that had been lined up alongside it.
"What's wrong?" Greed said. "Not thirsty anymore?"
"I'm not going to touch that. But you know, don't you? You know about the Zodiac Knights."
"Look at the glasses on the table. How many do you see?"
"Thirteen."
"There are thirteen Zodiac Knights, each of them bearing a unique sacred mark. They made a contract with God that they are beholden to fulfill. These contracts are called Divine Revelations."
"So that's the contract my dad mentioned?"
"Most likely."

“But why would Libra want to make contact with me?”
“I didn’t sense any enmity in him, so I suspect he just wanted to see you for himself. They’re no doubt mobilizing because the Door to Distant Lands is opening.”
“Does he intend to stop it from opening? Or the opposite?”
“He will act according to his Revelation. Their motivations are often difficult to interpret; the true intentions of the divine are impossible to read.”
So my father was prioritizing his own obligations. Nonetheless, he had made sure to spare the lives of the soldiers who got in his way. If what Greed said was true, then this Revelation hadn’t demanded their deaths. But that wasn’t to say it wouldn’t at some point require something worse…
“Will we have to fight?”
“You will. But there are thirteen of them. It would be suicide to take them all alone.”
“I already have Shin to worry about. Now you’re telling me I have to watch out for Zodiac Knights too?”
“Remember back when all we had to worry about was a measly Divine Dragon? Those were the days, huh?”
“I almost died back then. Take off the rose-tinted glasses, would you?”
I presumed that the Zodiac Knights were all in the Domain of E, like Eris and me. If that was the case, we were wildly outmatched. With how things were going, it seemed almost inevitable that we would meet Libra again before we reached Hausen. I stared at the swirling lees in the glass of wine on the table, my thoughts just as agitated.
“Should we order a fresh bottle?” suggested Greed.
“Yeah, good idea.”
It felt like a palate cleanser was in order. The wine on the table would only taste like a bad reminder. I stopped a passing waitress and ordered a fresh bottle.
“You haven’t touched the wine on the table,” she said. “Would you like me to clear it away?”
“Yeah, it was left behind by the guy who sat here before me.”
“Very well, I’ll bring a fresh bottle right away.”
I had learned that my dad was a Zodiac Knight, bound to a contract known as a Divine Revelation. I was at least glad to have come away from this meeting with some useful information. I wondered if he, too, had come back to life as a result of the Door to Distant Lands. If so, how many of the other Zodiac Knights had come back with him? I wanted to avoid as much trouble as possible. The Door to Distant Lands needed to be shut—that much was clear, no matter what else happened.
I reached to take the glass of wine the waitress proffered, but before I could, it was stolen by none other than Eris.
“I’ll take that,” she declared. “Looks delicious!” The wine disappeared before I could even voice an objection. Eris put the empty glass back on the table, a warm smile spreading across her face, her teeth stained by wine. “I

sensed something strange, so I came straight away, but it looks like they've already left."
"Yeah…"
"It's too crowded here. Let's head outside. I want to go someplace where we can feel the night breeze."
"Yeah, okay."
We left the tavern behind, even though I never got to taste a single drop of wine. We followed a road sloping up a hill that overlooked the town. Eris was light on her feet, as though the wine she had drunk at lunch was weaker than water.
"Nothing quite like the hair of the dog," she said. "I feel so refreshed!"
"Spoken like a true alcoholic."
"Liquor is like magic. It takes all your horrible memories and makes them disappear."
"What's up with you? You're not acting like yourself."
Eris was more reserved than usual. She wasn't as handsy either. Instead, she seemed almost shy—apprehensive. Suddenly, she walked up and hugged me.
"Hey!" I said as she giggled.
"Oh, come on. What's a hug between friends? I was on my best behavior all day."
I replied with an exasperated sigh.
"No sighing!" Eris protested. "I'm the queen of the kingdom, and you will show me proper respect!"
"Seriously, what's wrong?"
We arrived at a stunning view that let us see the whole of Tetra. The sky above was a dark quilt of stars. It almost seemed like a mirror, the lights of the town glowing like the stars overhead.
"It's beautiful, isn't it?" said Eris.
"It's breathtaking. I had no idea such a place existed."
"Incorrect! The *real* answer to my question was, 'Not as beautiful as you, Eris.'"
"Sorry, sorry."
"You don't mean that! You just don't understand the hearts of women at all, do you, Fate?"
We took in the view for a time. It was a pleasant way to spend the night. It certainly did more for my mood than any wine could have.
"You met a Zodiac Knight, didn't you?" Eris said finally. "You met Libra."
"He said that he'd come to meet my father and the other knights. I don't know how much of that was true, though."
"I see. When I heard you talk about your father and the red tattoo you described… I couldn't help but wonder." Eris shivered. She bit her lip like she was trying to stop the words from flooding out before she continued.
"This time…I will make sure to send him to hell myself. Fate, will you help me?"

She whispered the words almost like she was making a promise to herself.
“Eris…”
It seemed Eris and Libra had crossed paths in the past. I realized then that a longer life didn’t always lead to greater happiness. Sometimes, it just meant more burdens and regrets.

Chapter 4:
The Night Skies of Tetra

ERIS TOLD ME that Libra had a second name: the Bringer of Balance. He was a knight in service to God who was also prone to actions that ran contrary to that same job. Eris believed his Divine Revelation was something like “Expel any and all who dare to disturb the order of the world.” To achieve this goal, he was even willing to make contracts with demons.

As she explained, my mind leapt to the conclusion that those with Skills of Mortal Sin were Libra’s natural foes. He simply could not abide by the existence of skills that violated the natural order. When I shared this thought with Eris, she laughed. “He has bigger things to worry about,” she said. The Door to Distant Lands was surely his highest priority.

The Door had the ability to completely annihilate all order in the known world. This was made evident by the simple fact that by its power, the dead were returning to life.

Eris said, “Libra is useful to us so long as the Door remains a threat. When that’s no longer the case, I’ll kill him myself.”

Eris’s feelings about Libra ran deep. Merely speaking his name transfigured her face into a mask of hatred with but one desire—to see Libra dead. However, she told me nothing regarding the details of their relationship and shared past. So, for a time, we simply stared out at the night skies of Tetra.

“I’m sorry, Fate,” Eris said.

“It’s fine. We all have our secrets.”

Eris laughed. “I suppose it’s not so different from all the things you hide from Roxy. Have you told her about your condition yet?”

“I haven’t. I still can’t. But I think she found out when we switched bodies. Even then, she never broached the subject. Not even once.”

“You should be grateful to have her by your side. Not everyone would be so kind and considerate.”

“I give thanks every day.”

“Then you owe her some honesty. Better to tell her that time is running out before it actually does.”

“I…”

“You know better than anyone: she threw away her status as a holy knight to be by your side. Don’t make me tell you why, Fate. You already know.”

Eris gazed out into the distance, a faraway look in her eyes. She paid no attention to her surroundings, her eyes fixed on something much, much farther away.

I stared up at the night sky, my thoughts turning to Roxy and my journey to Galia. I had disguised my identity with a skull mask and fought to protect her; it had been my sole desire. I still remembered all the things we spoke

of when we found ourselves alone in the cavern underlying the great canyon. Even then Roxy had worried about me. And even though I had worn an arcane disguise, she'd told me that I reminded her of Fate Graphite. I'd almost jumped out of my skin. The whole thing had become a joke now, and Roxy never passed up an opportunity to bring it up, but it still made me want to crawl in a hole and die of embarrassment.

It had been no different after I returned to Seifort. In the battle with Rafale Vlerick, Roxy had accepted me for what I was.

To err is human, after all, I thought. As long as you live, you can't avoid making mistakes. But you can't allow yourself to be defined by them either. The pain of those mistakes must push you forward.

Roxy had lost many of her soldiers in Galia, and she knew the importance of mourning those losses. She also knew that if she let her regret control her actions, she wouldn't be able to lead her remaining troops. By watching her, I'd learned that people in power bore responsibility for their actions and needed to hold themselves to a higher standard of conduct.

By comparison, I was pretty immature. Roxy had endured so much that I still didn't know about, and despite that, she still worried about me. I'd become who I was now because of her. Of course, I couldn't downplay the influence of Eris, Myne, Aaron, and Memil, but if one person had truly shaped me more than anyone else, it was Roxy. Her warmth toward me was something special. Even an absolute dullard like me, always the butt of Greed's jokes, was sharp enough to recognize that.

When I'd been a mere servant, and even when I was an adventurer, it had felt too presumptuous to even consider. But when she'd wrapped me in her arms and spoken the words "Welcome home, Fate," my feelings for her had burst forth like water finally breaking through a dam.

"I love her," I said, turning to look at Eris, who was still gazing into the distance.

She turned to me with a smile. "You can finally admit it. But you shouldn't tell *me*, you should tell her. Let's just call this an act of generosity on my part, helping you practice for the big day!"

"Could you be any more conceited?"

Eris burst into laughter. "Well, I am a queen, you know. But in the one-in-a-million chance that you screw things up with Roxy, I'll always be here to comfort you."

I suddenly felt the full force of Eris's Lust skill, her charms surging through me. It was nearly impossible to tear myself away from her gaze. "Hey, what the hell?! Using your power now?"

"If your feelings are true, it shouldn't be a problem. If you can't resist this, you don't deserve her. So why don't you just give up and become my pet?"

"That arrogance is back…"

"Like I said, I'm a queen. Prone to bouts of selfishness, as you can imagine."

"Probably impossible to please too."

The two of us returned to gazing out at the night skies of Tetra. There was a light chill in the air, winter's last breath before spring.
"Shall we head back to the inn?"
Eris shook her head. I could have stayed there with her, but I got the feeling that she wanted some time to herself. Perhaps there were thoughts in her head with which she needed some time alone, and perhaps some of those thoughts were about that Zodiac Knight, Libra. I headed back to the inn by myself.
"Is it okay to leave her alone like that?" asked Greed as I walked down the sloping streets.
"I'd only make things more awkward if I stuck around," I said.
Greed cackled. "So glad to see you've finally learned to read the room. My boy's growing up!"
"Quit treating me like a child!"
Greed's voice suddenly quietened. "So, you're going to fight your father."
"If he's caught up with those Zodiac Knights, probably. But you knew that already, didn't you?"
"And what if I did?"
"Then it would be completely in character. Like a regular book of secrets, you are."
"Of course. But chin up, Fate. Even without me having to spill all my secrets, you've managed to come this far. Something to be proud of."
I still wouldn't have made it without Greed's power. He was full of unspoken history, that was for sure, but when push came to shove, he always revealed what I needed when I needed it. Regarding my father, Greed had told me not to follow him. He had said his piece, but I was no longer a child.
"I'm my own man now," I said. "I'll make my own decisions."
"In which case, all that's left is to head for Hausen. But don't forget to keep your senses sharp with practice. I probably don't have to remind you."
"That unbreakable ice… I'm going to need some way to get around that attack." To overcome it, I would need complete mastery over Greed's fourth level, the black stave. I needed to master the black flames so they would defeat the ice my father wielded. If I couldn't do that, I'd be powerless against the thick frozen walls he was sure to put in my way. "I'll be waiting for you tonight, Greed."
"I like that enthusiasm! Best get word to Luna too. She's been champing at the bit recently."
It seemed that Luna, too, had something she wanted to tell Myne, her older sister. Those unspoken feelings were probably what had made her such an active part of my training with Greed of late.
I felt two things when I sparred with Luna: first, that she was very good, but second…she truly disdained battle. I wondered if she was afraid. I felt something similar—a fear of endless strife. For as long as I had Gluttony, the battles would never end. The only way out, it seemed, was death.
"Luna seems more open to talking recently. More prone to sharing," I said.

“She’s always been talkative,” Greed muttered. “She’s probably just feeling more like herself again.”
“But you don’t talk much with her at all, Greed. Why is that?”
“The mighty Greed has his reasons!”
What was with this sudden reluctance?! The infinitely arrogant Greed betrayed a slight uncertainty with his words. Thinking back to our time in the spiritual plane, Greed had always made sure to keep his distance from Luna. Why was that? I was desperate to know. “Well then? I’m still waiting to hear these reasons.”
“Then you’ll keep waiting! Quit being nosy!”
“This isn’t like you at all, Greed. You’re being weird.”
“You’re weird! Everyone’s weird!”
Pushing him only made him dig his heels in. He seemed to almost be panicking. This was so unlike him—I’d never seen him react in such a way. But there was nothing else I could do. If he’d made up his mind to keep his figurative mouth shut, it would stay shut.
“Fine,” I said. “I’ll just have to ask Luna.”
“Hey! Hang on, let’s not be too hasty.”
“You said it yourself. She’s been more talkative lately. More willing to open up. I’m sure she’ll tell me all about it if I just ask.”
If I wanted to learn more about Greed and Luna, there was nobody to ask but the people in question. And pestering Greed was a dead end.
“All right, I’ve made up my mind,” I declared.
“As have I,” added Greed, “I have no choice but to murder you on the spiritual plane.”
“Hey!”
As usual, the black sword’s solution was excessive.
We walked along the almost deserted main street of Tetra. It was past midnight, but there were still lights on in the inn, and they seemed to welcome my return. This inn was frequented by adventurers and open day and night to accommodate those going on night hunts. That convenience was the reason we’d chosen it. Although it’s worth mentioning that the beds were also fantastically soft, an amenity about which the rest of the party was very particular.
I lit the lamp in my darkened room; the tremulous wavering of its light practically invited slumber. Yawning, I placed Greed against the wall. I figured a bath could wait until the morning. For now, all I wanted to do was crawl into bed, and I did just that. Except…
“Huh?”
I couldn’t put my finger on what I was touching. It was soft, but…it wasn’t the bed.
“Ahhhh…”
And now there’s a voice?! No, it can’t be! I’d forgotten about it in all the surprises of the evening, but now it all came rushing back.
“Just where do you think you’re touching me?!” came a voice.

Just as I thought! It was Memil, her cheeks flushed bright crimson. She'd waited for me all night, though I had to admit that I didn't appreciate how she'd chosen to wait.
"I wouldn't be touching you if you chose better places to wait!"
"What was I supposed to do? I was waiting and waiting, and you never came back… I got sleepy."
"That's why there's a bed in your room! For sleeping!"
"How can you say that? You know why I'm here!"
It was extremely obvious that Memil was at her limit; her eyes sparkled the color of fresh blood. She hungered for my blood, and when she reached this state, she was like a starving wild animal.
"I need it…quickly…I cannot wait!"
"Okay, okay, take it easy! It's the middle of the night!"
"I've been waiting so long! I can't wait anymore!"
"I said take it easy—gah!"
Memil pounced. She was done listening to reason. The force of her body pushed me back onto the bed, and before I could react, she sank her fangs into my neck. At times like this, her more sadistic side revealed itself.
"Memil, seriously, take it easy…" I moaned.
But I was tired and exhausted, and my consciousness quickly began to fade. Memil lifted her head from my neck for a moment and grinned, her lips stained crimson with my blood.
"Leave the rest to me," she said. "You just lie back and relax."
Her fangs glinted suspiciously in the light of the lamp. Then they clamped down once more upon my neck. No pain accompanied the bite, only the world fading to black nothingness.

Chapter 5:
Luna on the Spiritual Plane

PLACES YOU LONG FOR but can never return to—if there was a world composed of places like that, it would perhaps resemble the spiritual plane. I stood right in the center of it, surrounded by a landscape of alabaster white that stretched beyond the horizon and into eternity. This landscape would never change no matter how far I walked. I visited so often that it almost felt like a second home.

Greed and Luna aren't usually late, I thought.

Typically, they were waiting for me when I arrived. This time I was all on my own. Luna was the creator of this spiritual plane. Below it was the world of my Gluttony, a prison where the souls I had consumed cried out in despair and resentment, pleading for salvation.

In Galia, when I had almost lost control of my Gluttony, Luna had saved me by creating this safe harbor. In essence, it acted as a barrier against the effects of Gluttony's hunger.

I waited and waited, and eventually I laid down on the white floor. In the real world, I was sound asleep in my bed. It made me wonder what would happen if I did the same here. Out of curiosity, I closed my eyes. Then I heard a familiar voice call out. It rang sweetly and had a certain youth to it…

"Luna! I've been waiting for you."

"This is the first time I've seen anyone try to sleep here. You've got some guts though, lying there waiting to peep at a lady like a dirty little pervert."

As Luna stepped closer to me, I clambered to my feet. It felt almost like she dared me to look.

"Eh? Ah, that wasn't what I was doing."

"How unfortunate. I was hoping you might stay there a little longer so I could stomp on you."

"That doesn't sound so bad, actually."

Luna's eyes narrowed to slits as she watched me getting ready to lie down again. "Ew. Seriously?"

I laughed. "It's a joke, Luna."

"Why you—"

When we first met, we had been stilted and awkward around each other, but now we knew each other well enough to banter. Though I was grateful to Luna, I still harbored feelings of guilt for what I'd done to her. After all, when she was part of the monster Haniel, I had devoured her soul. Though she had created this spiritual plane, she was still destined to spend an eternity in the prison of my Gluttony. She had spent an unfathomable amount of time trapped in the core of Haniel, only to end up here. I couldn't consider it any sort of salvation.

Even so, Luna had thanked me before. She said she was glad that, at the very least, she'd ended up somewhere that she could be herself. But when I heard that, I only grew more miserable. We lived in an unfair world where nothing went the way it should. Yet once, long, long ago, supposedly the world had been in the care of a God who offered salvation. I'd grown up hearing those stories from my father.

Back then, I'd believed in it too—in a time when the God Laplace had brought peace to all. An age in which all people lived equally, without skills or stats, without the threat of monsters. It was a just-so story to explain the world. The protection of Laplace, so it was said, had brought an eternity of bliss. But that god had vanished from our world, leaving behind skills, stats, and monsters, all of them trials for humans to overcome.

The memories of those stories came flooding back, even though I'd abandoned my faith the day my father died.

"What's wrong?" Luna asked, her head tilted in curiosity. "You look rather perplexed… Ah, I see. You're thinking about how to get a peek at my panties, aren't you?"

"I am not!"

"Is that so? Recently you've been up to all sorts of activities with a whole variety of young women."

"Hey! I'll have you know all of that has been well above board!"

"Oh, really? I've been watching it all through your eyes, Fate. Nobody knows you better than I do."

"Please, can't a guy get a little privacy?"

"No need to worry, Fate. I'm very good at keeping secrets."

When we first met, Luna had seemed so shy and timid, but I couldn't find a single trace of that girl in the one who stood before me. She was lively, talkative, and always laughing. Even so, here in the spiritual plane, Luna could see the real world through my eyes, so she knew about my father, the Zodiac Knights, and Libra. Of course, she also knew all about what Eris and I had discussed as we gazed up at the night skies of Tetra. Luna enjoyed watching how I reacted to it all.

"I want things to go well between you and Roxy," she said. "I honestly do. But if you've really made up your mind, I think the sooner you tell her the better."

"I know, but…"

"I know that your Gluttony makes it difficult for you to fully open your heart. But if Roxy really is more important to you than anything else in this world, then that settles it."

Luna didn't go any further; she didn't have to. We both knew what my Gluttony hungered for more than anything else. It hungered for those dearest to me—a quirk of this particular skill that I never wanted to think about. Even Luna didn't know what would happen if the worst came to pass. And the reason she didn't was because the last bearer of Gluttony hadn't let it happen.

“You know the risk, but you still want to be with her. She wants to be with you too. So, all you can do is keep on going. Nevertheless, you must not forget that if you ever lose control, you put her life in danger.”
“I won’t forget, and…I’ll tell her.”
Luna nodded, satisfied. “I’m counting on you, Fate.” Her head once again tilted to the side. “Speaking of, don’t you think you’re playing things a little too…loose and casual recently?”
I knew exactly what she was talking about. Consumed by awkwardness, I barely stammered a reply. “Huh? What are you talking about?”
But Luna was always watching, which meant she knew what had happened to me right before I arrived in the spiritual plane. She giggled. “Don’t act like you don’t know! It’s practically written all over your face. You look so embarrassed.”
“No comment.”
“Hm. Well, in that case… Shall we have a look at what’s happening in bed at this very moment?”
“Y-you can do that?”
“Of course I can. Now let’s see what’s going on.”
Luna snapped her fingers in a way that felt rehearsed. A rectangular, screen-like shape appeared before us. It displayed the ceiling of my room. I seemed to be sleeping on my back. Quite the sound sleeper, I didn’t toss and turn. We heard the regular sounds of my breathing. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.
“You got me all worried, but I’m just sleeping,” I said. “What’s so interesting about this? I’m just…”
Then I remembered that Memil had been drinking my blood. I’d passed out from a combination of blood loss and exhaustion, and found myself in the spiritual plane without any idea what had happened after Memil finished. I hoped that she’d simply gone back to her own room, satisfied and satiated… but recently, I’d been waking up to find Memil sleeping in my bed with me more often than not. I’d tried telling her off, but she said she couldn’t help herself, as drinking blood made her too drowsy to move. She claimed that she fell asleep on the spot.
But looking at the screen now… I couldn’t see Memil anywhere. I breathed a sigh of relief.
“Ah! Look! There’s Memil,” cried Luna.
“Huh?!”
We heard something shuffling under my blanket before Memil’s head suddenly popped out from it. “I’m still thirsty. Master! Are you awake? No… He’s out cold. In which case, happy hour!”
Memil sunk her fangs into my neck. I had no idea she did it all night long! That explained why I sometimes woke up light-headed and bleary.
“She’s taking too much blood!” I shouted.
“Calm down, Fate, calm down. It isn’t *that* bad.”
“There’s… there’s more?”

“There is.”
Luna locked me into a tight, inescapable grapple as I fought to wake myself up, and a crooked grin grew on her face.
This is bad. This has to be bad!
We watched the screen before us as Memil lifted her head from my neck, a look of pure satisfaction on her face. “Ah! Delicious. Any more than this and he’ll die of blood loss. I must resist! Well, well…”
Then we heard the rustle of the blanket again as Memil disappeared from view. Where was she going?! I knew she was lying down, but…
“Luna, I have to know! Let me go!”
“Cool it, Fate! How about a little trust?”
A few moments later I heard Memil’s soft breaths. Between them, muffled and difficult to discern, I occasionally heard faint whispers of, “Brother, why?”
Was Memil dreaming of Rafale and Hado? Either way, I’d just caught a glimpse of a different person, one who didn’t have her guard up. She always said that the past was the past, but I always wondered how much she really meant that. In truth, when her own family betrayed her, it had left wounds on her soul that only manifested in quiet moments like this.
“I’ll have to be more considerate toward her going forward,” I said. “Thank you for showing me this, Luna.”
“You’re most welcome. I couldn’t just sit by and let this go. Sometimes the memories come back to her, and they come with tears.”
“I had no idea…”
“That being said, you should be more wary. When she’s in a good mood, she likes to play tricks on you.”
“What?! That girl is incorrigible. Perhaps a little discipline is in order.”
I didn’t know exactly what Memil was doing, but I gathered that it wasn’t anything too serious, given the impish grin on Luna’s face. I still couldn’t bear to see Memil weeping. I turned away from the screen and toward Luna. It was about time to get to the reason I was really here, and nobody knew better than her. She seemed to understand at that moment, and she snapped her fingers. The screen vanished.
Then Luna just stood there, impassive. Her expression suggested that she was waiting for me, so I decided to get right to it. I took a deep breath.
“Why is Myne so intent on getting to the Door to Distant Lands? I want to know what I can before we arrive at Hausen.”
“Yes… Her goal hasn’t changed a bit. Not then, not now. It’s always been the same thing.”
Luna stared out at the endless expanse of white that surrounded us, and she began to talk. What she told me filled me with an abyss of inescapable sadness. When she finished, I had made up my mind: I would do anything to stop Myne.

Chapter 6:
Roxy's Declaration

"FAY! FAY!"

From the moment I heard my name, I opened my eyes to see Roxy with her cheeks puffed up in anger. She was ready to hit the road at a moment's notice, fully dressed in her newly acquired white adventurer's garb, her sword dangling from the sword-belt at her waist. I, however, lay in bed, still in my pajamas.

"Sorry," I said. "I guess I must have slept in."

"I've no issues with that. We're not that far behind schedule, so the time isn't a problem. However! How do you explain this?!"

"Huh…?"

Roxy pointed to my armpits, and as I looked, I realized with dawning horror that I wasn't alone.

"What?! How?!"

On one side lay Memil. She was making a habit out of collapsing into deep slumber after she drank my blood, and I'd pretty much abandoned any hope of improving her behavior. But I couldn't believe what I saw on the other side. That lustrous, beautiful blue hair…it could only belong to one person.

"Eris!"

I sat up in sheer shock, taking the blanket with me and revealing…

"Eh…?"

I don't know what went through her head, but I couldn't believe the way Eris chose to sleep. She wasn't wearing a single shred of clothing. Not even underwear! She was as naked as a newborn.

Roxy covered my eyes with both of her hands in a flash. “What is going on?! Fay!”
“This…I have no idea! I really don’t!”
Memil slowly woke from all the commotion. She had drooled in her sleep, and I heard her wipe her mouth as she yawned. “What’s all the fuss about? Did something happen?”
“Of course something happened! You happened!” I shouted. “Isn’t it about time you started sleeping in your own room? You’ve landed me in a world of trouble!”
“Oh, dearest me, it seems that I was so drowsy after drinking your blood last night that I must have fallen asleep right in your bed. My apologies. But we’re siblings, after all, so I don’t see any problem with it.”
“*I* see a problem with it!” Roxy replied immediately, her objection falling on deaf ears.
“Oh, Lady Roxy! Good morning. It’s so nice to see you and Fate so chummy so early in the morning. But…why are you covering his eyes?”
“Well—you can see for yourself! Her Majesty is right there, and look how she’s sleeping!”
“Her Majesty? Hm? What?! Master! What is the meaning of this?! What on earth were you up to while I slept innocently by your side?! I demand a detailed explanation this instant!”
Now not only were my eyes covered by Roxy, but I could feel Memil grab my shirt collar and pull it toward her.
Give me a break, I literally just woke up! I swear to you that I didn’t do anything! Even I want to know why Eris is sleeping next to me in the nude!
“I don’t know, I swear!” I protested. “Eris! Wake up! Eris!”
I don’t know how many times I called her name before she finally began to awaken from her slumber. I couldn’t see it because my eyes were covered, but I felt her putting her hands all over me.
“Morning, everyone… What’s all the ruckus about? You’re all so noisy.”
“The ruckus is about you!” I shouted. “What are you doing here?! And why are you naked?!”
“Hm? This is your room? I must have mixed up the rooms last night and slept in your bed. Pardon me. But I’ve always slept like this, especially now that it’s getting warmer. You didn’t know?”
“Of course I didn’t know!”
“Oh. I see. Well, I suppose you do now.”
There was palpable joy in Eris’s voice as she threw her arms around me. I still couldn’t see a thing because of Roxy’s hands, but I felt the softness of Eris’s body as it pressed into me.
“Well, good night then!” said Eris.
“No! Wake up! Get dressed!”
Roxy pushed against my eyes with more force. Meanwhile, it seemed that Memil had decided to bite into my arm. Those easygoing days of refreshing mornings in Barbatos Manor suddenly felt like a distant memory. This was

the total opposite, like being thrown straight into chaos. I suddenly missed waking up to Sahara's voice.
Before this, I had only traveled by myself or with Myne. Traveling with three women suddenly seemed much more challenging than I thought. I'd never survive if this was what every morning was going to look like.
Somehow, I managed to get Eris to explain that nothing had happened during the night, and that was enough to convince Roxy and Memil that it was all a big misunderstanding.
"Your Majesty, you really mustn't sleep with Fate," said Roxy. "Especially not without some sort of clothing."
"Oh?" said Eris, shocked. "Sleeping naked isn't allowed?"
"Of course not!"
"Next time I'll wear some clothes then. Problem solved."
"Objection!" said Memil. "Your Majesty, I must insist that you sleep in your own room!"
Eris let out a groan of disappointment. "I might not look like it, but I get pretty lonely, you know. Besides, Fate seems to love the attention."
"Is that true, Fay?"
Hey! Don't go blaming me all of a sudden! I shook my head vigorously.
Roxy nodded. "It's indecent. Your Majesty, from now on please sleep in your own room."
"Whaaaaaaat?"
"That means you too, Memil. However sedated you might get from drinking Fay's blood, that does not grant you permission to join him in bed."
"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaat?"
Neither Eris nor Memil were particularly pleased with Roxy's decision. For my part, I really wished she'd asked Eris to get dressed before they had this debate. I felt like I was going to be stuck with my eyes covered forever.
Eris spoke before I could voice an opinion."But you're always spending time with him, Roxy. I feel like it's only fair that we get to spend some time with him too."
"I…"
"And don't forget you spent half the day with him going to his village yesterday," said Eris.
"That's true, that's true," added Memil.
The two of them kept pressuring Roxy, but she raised her voice and shot them both down. "No! I will not stand for it! And Memil, you're here to assist Her Majesty, are you not? Please get her dressed!"
Eris and Memil wilted a little under the glare of Roxy as she showed a rare flash of anger. They slunk out of the room, cowed. Roxy really was the only one I could rely on in situations like this, and I nodded appreciatively, my eyes still covered.
"You're also partially at fault, Fay. You make it too easy for them to do such things. Please try to stay out of trouble."
"I'm truly sorry, Roxy."

Eris and Memil acted in such mysterious ways that I could barely guess what they'd do next. I could be as careful as humanly possible, but I had no way of knowing what nonsense they would pull. Not to mention that sleep brought its own unique challenges. Whenever I was talking or sparring with Luna and Greed, it was practically impossible to wake me up.
When Roxy finally took her hands from my eyes, she looked at me with a sly grin. I'd seen that look on her face before, and it usually meant she was up to no good. When Roxy was like this, she wasn't all that dissimilar to Eris and Memil. I felt myself getting nervous as her smile widened.
"It seems to me there's only one way to solve this," she proclaimed. "At our next inn, you and I will share a room, Fay."
"Huh?"
"What do you mean, 'huh'? Are you saying you don't like my idea?"
Roxy's brow creased as her face drew closer to my own. In truth, I was ecstatic. It was a great idea.
"It's not that," I stammered. "I'm just…I'm a bit nervous…"
"Well, s-so am I! But I can't just sit on my hands and watch this sort of thing go on! At this rate, they'll be barging into your room just as soon as the next opportunity presents itself!"
"I don't think I could survive this every day…"
"Well, you won't have to, with me watching over you."
Roxy's cheeks flushed pale pink, but she was clearly pleased with her idea. Warmth bloomed across my face. Progress between us was slow and steady, but now we'd be sharing a room, and it was too late to worry about whether it was a good idea. Luna would have her complaints, but for me, sharing such intimate space with Roxy was like something out of a dream.
"Thank you, Roxy," I said.
"You're most welcome. We'll start from this evening."
Roxy reached a hand toward me, and I realized I still hadn't gotten out of bed. I gripped her hand and pulled myself up.
"I should get changed," I said. "Did you have breakfast already?"
"No, I was waiting for everyone else to wake up. I'll see you in the dining area when you're ready." Roxy shot me a grin and left.
The room went completely silent now that I was alone. I didn't want to leave everyone waiting, so I equipped my gear as quickly as I could. Once I had the black sword strapped to my waist, I was good to go.
"Quite the energetic start to the day," said Greed as I walked to the door.
"What's with that tone? I bet you were just sitting there watching the whole thing happen last night."
"Well, Memil is Memil. Nothing out of the ordinary there. Eris, on the other hand, was probably more shaken by Libra's appearance than she let on. She plays it tough sometimes, but I think she wanted to share your bed because she was scared."
"You think so? This Libra…They have something of a long history, don't they?"

“That they do. Funny, it’s quite unusual for you not to pry into that sort of thing. You didn’t even ask Luna.”
“When I saw Eris’s face, I realized there was a great deal roiling around inside of her. I didn’t feel like it was right to ask.”
Greed laughed. “Look at you, finally learning some manners! My boy’s growing up!”
“Ugh, I told you to quit treating me like a kid.” I wasn’t in the mood to be teased, so I changed topics. “Luna’s lonely, you know. She said you didn’t visit the other day.”
“Hmph. What’s that got to do with me? I don’t care.”
“Really? Not at all?”
“N-not in the slightest!”
“Stammering much?”
“The mighty Greed would never! I did no such thing!”
Greed’s mood soured in an instant and he sank into self-conscious silence. Whenever I mentioned Luna, he became oddly dismissive and stubborn, which only made me more curious. I didn’t have to worry about manners when it came to Greed, so I figured I would just keep hassling him. As I walked toward the dining room, I considered some potential strategies to get him to open up.
Roxy was quite interested in Greed, so perhaps I could ask her for advice. She was sure to be intrigued if I told her about his relationship with Luna. It felt like the perfect topic for breakfast conversation. I could already picture Greed writhing in his scabbard as he realized he was being made the center of attention.

Chapter 7:
The Journey Continues

IN FACT, EVERYONE was excited to speculate about Greed and Luna over breakfast. According to Eris, their relationship was quite unusual.
“What kind of unusual are we talking here?” asked Roxy.
“That’s precisely what I was going to ask!” said Memil.
Roxy and Memil were always on the same wavelength at times like this. Their eyes sparkled with excitement as they waited for Eris to speak again. It was clear by her face that Eris relished their attention, even though she wasn’t actually the topic of conversation.
I tore a hunk of bread to chew on as I gazed at the black sword resting on the table. It was true that I couldn’t know what he was thinking without touching him to use my Telepathy skill, but we’d been together long enough now that I had no problem imagining his words.
Fate! I won’t forget this! This…humiliation! You’ll pay for this!
I didn’t need Telepathy to know that was exactly what he wanted to say. Even so, Greed had told me that once his next level got unlocked, he would restore some of his lost power and, with it, the ability to communicate with me without relying on Telepathy. On that day, you could bet he wouldn’t simply stand by and let the girls gossip about him. I actually kind of wanted to hear how that conversation would go, so I was quite eager for Greed to regain the ability to talk freely.
As I thought about it, I couldn’t help but smile. Roxy watched me as a smile grew upon her own face as well.
“Someone’s having a good morning,” she said.
“This is the first time I’ve been on a journey that felt so exuberant.”
“You’re most used to traveling with Myne, aren’t you?”
“Yeah. She rarely talked any more than the bare minimum, and I can only ever talk to Greed through my Telepathy. I’m used to traveling mostly in silence.”
“I still haven’t had a chance to talk to Myne. I hope I can when we get to Hausen…”
It was nice of Roxy to say so, but I wondered if they’d be able to have much of a conversation. Knowing Myne as well as I did, I didn’t have high hopes. Myne was stubborn, awkward, and obsessed with gold and money. Maybe the money part of her personality didn’t make a difference, but Myne was not the sort of person to care what other people thought. Perhaps she had lived for so long that the words of young people just didn’t mean anything to her.
“When you see Myne again, what do you want to talk about with her, Fay?”

The morning sun poured in through the window and glinted off of Roxy's smile. That almost blinding optimism seemed to clear away my doubts. Her question was like a reflection of who she was, and all her positivity.
"You're smiling again!" she said, her cheeks puffing up because she thought I was teasing her.
"Don't get the wrong idea! You're just really amazing, Roxy."
"What? Where did that come from ?"
Perhaps it really would be just as easy to talk to Myne as Roxy thought. It was an important lesson, in a way. Battles were not only fought with weapons.
"Thank you, Roxy."
"Fay?"
"When I meet Myne, what will I say?" I wondered. "Ah, I've got it!"
"What is it? What is it?"
"Uh…"
It was hard to say it with her sitting there in front of me. But Roxy didn't mind in the slightest, so she kept pushing.
"Tell me!" she urged. "You can't come this far then keep it a secret!"
"It's…"
"It's what?"
"It's just… I want to try to make it so I can talk to Myne the same way that I can talk with you, Roxy. So all I can do is just believe in her and trust that one day we will."
"Fay…"
"But I owe it all to you, Roxy. I was running around without purpose, and you accepted me for who I was. Someday, I'd like to be just like you in that regard…" Suddenly shy and embarrassed, I looked down at my bread as I took another bite.
Then Roxy's hand stretched out and gently patted me on the head. "Who's a good boy?" she said. "You're a good boy!"
"Hey!"
"I *am* older than you, after all. It's my job to praise you when I see that you're growing up."
"But you're embarrassing me…"
"If I'm not bothered by it, then you shouldn't be either."
"Yeah, well, the way *you* look at me isn't the problem…"
For some time now, the two girls across the table had glowered at us with steadily escalating intensity. We were supposed to be talking about Greed and Luna, but all of a sudden Roxy and I had veered off into our own little world. Eris held a knife to her neck and shot us a daring grin. Memil simply stared at us silently, as if the color had drained from her eyes.
Roxy finally noticed. She pulled her hand away from my head and looked down at her lap. "Ooooh…" she muttered.
Her face blazed redder with every passing moment, and I felt the same embarrassment coursing through me too.

Eris pointed her knife toward us. “Off to an early start today, aren’t you? I don’t suppose this is because you found us in bed with Fate this morning, is it?”
“No, I can assure you it has nothing to do with that!” said Roxy.
“Hm. I wonder if you’re telling the truth… Memil, what say you?”
“I think you’re right, Your Majesty!”
“Memil! How could you? I swear to you both, this has nothing to do with this morning!”
“How can we be sure?” said Eris.
“Your Majesty…You’re so cruel sometimes.” Memil giggled.
Roxy was outnumbered two to one. I wanted to jump in and help her, but I knew I’d only make matters worse, so I bit my tongue. Roxy gave me a desperate look, but all I could do was smile wryly in return. I mean, just being on a trip with Roxy put me over the moon. I didn’t actually have the power or the means to control the two free spirits who had put her on the spot. And in a way, I thought it was best just to leave Eris and Memil as they were. With that in mind, I decided to take a step back and keep an eye on things from a distance.
“Fay, please say something,” Roxy said.
“Something.”
“Not ‘something,’ say something else!”
“Something else.”
“Fay!”
In the end, I miscalculated, because Roxy chewed me out.

***

With our raucous breakfast out of the way, we took our leave from the inn. As we did, I was flooded with complaints from Greed through my Telepathy.
“You’re a real piece of work, you hear me, Fate?” he roared in my head.
“What’s the big deal? It’s your fault for not telling me anything. What choice did I have but to put you on the table and make you the centerpiece?”
“I’m nobody’s entertainment! That Eris… She’ll take any chance she can get to belittle me.”
“She was pretty unruly. I was worried because she’s been acting weird since we met Libra. Honestly, I was relieved to see that she looked to be back to her old self while we dissected your romantic issues.”
“Relieved?! She says whatever she wants because she knows the only way I can talk back is like this! She’s always been like that. She’s a wimp when it comes to facing her own problems, but when it comes to someone else, she’s more than happy to barge in and trample all over them!”
I was surprised to hear Greed use the word wimp. I looked over at Eris, wondering. “Wimp? Really? That’s Eris you’re talking about. Just this morning she… Well, she had some pretty cavalier sleeping habits, you know?”

“Ha! You just can’t see it. You don’t know her at all. Her white knights told you, didn’t they? She’s not as strong as you think she is.”
“I just can’t believe it, that’s all…”
“That’s because you haven’t spent much time with her. Think back, Fate. She’s found reasons to stay away from you, hasn’t she?”
“That’s true.”
Greed was never one to go out of his way to tell me what I wanted to know, but he wasn’t a liar either. He liked to poke fun at me, and he didn’t shy from saying what was on his mind. When it came down to it, he was brutally honest. That meant that Eris really did have a side that I didn’t know about. Perhaps the person I’d spent time with last night on the hill overlooking Tetra was, in fact, the real Eris.
“You’ll learn at some point on this journey,” said Greed. “Now that Libra has shown himself, there’s no avoiding it. It’s going to be rough for you, Fate. Myne, your father, the Door to Distant Lands…and now Eris. Think you can handle all of it?”
“What choice do I have?”
“Ha! Indeed. Until just a little while ago you had your hands full managing only Roxy and yourself.”
“Well, not everything is going to go the way you want. It was like that with Roxy, and of course, it’s like that with me too. But all I can do now is give it the best I’ve got.”
“How’s the situation with your body, anyway?”
“Thanks to Luna, it’s under control. It helps having Memil around too.”
“I see… Fate, let me give you a warning. Something to keep in mind for later.”
“Hm? What is it?”
“Remember this: Your Gluttony is a skill that absorbs souls and gives you their power. Because it is all powerful, there are times when that power won’t help you at all.”
“What does that mean?”
“Think of the words like a good luck charm. Anyway, that’s enough for now. Better hurry up or your three girlfriends are going to scold you.”
Looking up, I realized that Roxy and the others were waiting by the motorcycles. Roxy looked back and waved for me to hurry up. I ran over and hopped on the bike, but Roxy started tugging at my sleeve. Her mannerisms were odd…like she was hesitating.
“I have…a request,” she said.
“What’s up?”
Roxy pointed at the motorcycle’s handlebars. “Can I try it?”
“You want to drive?”
“Yes! You always look like you’re having so much fun, so I really want to try it out! But you want to drive too, don’t you, Fay?” She clasped her hands together at her chest, like a child pleading with a parent. I really didn’t have a choice.

“Of course you can drive,” I said. “We’re still quite a way from Hausen, so we can take turns.”
“Really?! Yes!”
“Okay, then let me get the bike out of Tetra, and you can drive from there.”
“Roger that!”
Roxy bubbled with excitement as she hopped on the motorcycle behind me. It could have been my imagination, but I also felt like she hugged me a little tighter than was typical too. As usual, Eris and Memil scowled icily at us, but I did my best to ignore them.
“Eris,” I said, “Roxy’s going to drive for a while, so I want to show her the ropes somewhere outside of Tetra. Ideally somewhere with a lot of space.”
“Understood. In that case, we’ll also swap. It’ll be best for all of us if Memil learns to drive too. You want to give it a shot, Memil?”
“It would be an honor. And I must confess that I’m quite intrigued, having watched you drive all this way.”
The motorbikes were nothing if not popular. We weaved through the main street and put Tetra behind us. Roxy and Memil were truly excited to get on the bikes and give them a spin; I could hear them chatting about which one would learn the quickest.

Chapter 8:
Bullets of Jealousy

"WOOHOO! This is so much fun!" Memil yelled.
The bike zoomed past us. Memil was a natural, picking up the basics like she'd biked her entire life. Her motorcycle snaked wild, undulating trails across the ground. Memil even used raised sections of the earth like ramps, sending the bike flying through the air.
As for Roxy, well…
"Oh, no! *Oh, no!* Fay! Big trouble!"
"Easy there! Let's take some deep breaths and start by calming down, okay, Roxy? Whoa!"
To put it mildly, Roxy was a bad driver. But she was still a beginner, and with practice, I was sure she'd improve. She had all the skills needed, she just didn't have the muscle memory. For me, horses were more difficult than motorbikes. Roxy was good with horses, so it was only a matter of time before she caught up to Memil.
"Fay! Fay! There's a giant rock! It's right there! Right in front of us!"
"Whoa! Let's keep calm and drive around it."
"Okay."
Contrary to Roxy's assurance, we continued straight for the rock. The bike hurtled ever closer, so I reached my hands out from behind to grip the handlebars.
"Ah, Fay!"
"It's okay. We'll drive together for a little while."
"Okay…"
There was a little surprise in Roxy's voice as I placed my hands on her own. We swerved out of the way of the rock and toward Memil and Eris.
"Whew, that was close," I said.
"Great job, Fay. Oh, but…" Roxy trailed off.
I felt my face growing hot as I realized the position I had put us in. We were so close that I was practically riding on top of her. I felt the heat of her body and the nervous beating of her heart.
"I'm… I'm sorry," I said.
"No, don't worry. I-I'm not…uncomfortable or anything."
Usually so forward, Roxy spoke with flustered, self-conscious words. I couldn't release the handlebars yet anyway. She still didn't know how to drive. I couldn't imagine anything to say in this situation, so we rode in silence for a time, just listening to the humming engine of the motorbike. Glancing at Memil and Eris as they rode ahead of us, they glared back like they had something they wanted to say.
"What?" I asked, pulling our bike up beside them.

Eris's cheeks puffed up and she responded by pointing her gunblade directly at me! "Your Gluttony must be starving," she said, a chill in her words. "So, feast on this for now."
"Hey! Relax, don't do anything rash!"
"Do it, Your Majesty!" cried Memil as she kept their motorbike steady.
Both Eris and Memil looked deadly serious. This was no joke!
"Roxy! We're getting out of here!"
"Oh? What happened?"
Roxy was so worried about her driving that she didn't notice anything else. She wasn't even aware that Eris had pointed her gunblade right at us. At this rate, I was going to eat lead. Eris's finger hovered over the trigger, ready to fire at a moment's notice.
"I'll tell you later," I shouted. "But for now we're out of here!"
"Now, wait just a moment, Fay. Wai—ahhhhh!"
This was an emergency. I put my trust in the bike's potential and gave it a burst of speed. As we sped toward an upcoming cliff, I didn't even try to turn us around. We plunged straight down. Such a move was suicide on a horse, hence Roxy's scream.
"Fay!"
"There we go," I said, as the bike's tires gripped the sheer cliff face. It was equipped with a gyroscopic stabilizer, allowing it to drive down cliffs impossible to reach on horseback. "We'll be okay, but it's going to be a bumpy ride!"
"Why are you doing this to a beginner?! Fay!"
"Sorry, sorry."
I looked over my shoulder to check on our pursuers. Memil was a beginner, just like Roxy, so I wanted to believe that it was still too early for her to attempt cliff faces. I couldn't believe it…
"She's right behind us?! How did she learn to drive so quick?!"
"I won't let you get away, Master!" Memil roared over the engines.
"Are you ready?" Eris asked with a crooked grin, her gunblade once again pointed at me and primed to fire.
She's really going to shoot! I let go of the handlebars and unsheathed the black sword. Doing so left Roxy to handle the bike's descent all on her own. She cried out, almost shrieking, "Fay! I can't do this! We're doomed!"
"You have to! Eris is firing at us!"
"Really?!"
"Really! See for yourself!"
"Your Majesty, why?!"
Eris fired another round as Roxy spoke. She wasn't fooling around! Fortunately, I was prepared, and I deflected her bullet with a swing of the black sword. Seeing my maneuver, Eris broke into a full-fledged smile.
"You've got some guts. Time to pull out all the stops."
"Stop it, Eris!"
"No can do, Fate. We've reached the limits of our patience."

“Yes, yes,” added Memil. “Prepare yourself, Master!”
Even Memil?! But I’m technically her master! What is this, a rebellion?! I glanced over my shoulder. “Roxy, can you handle it?”
“I-I think so. But I’m not sure, Fay!”
“She’s firing another volley! Just try to keep us straight!” I shouted over the din of battle.
Eris unleashed a ceaseless barrage.
“Damn it! This trigger-happy queen is crossing the line!”
Eris laughed. “I’ll take that as a compliment. But I’m just getting started!”
“Stop it!”
“Go, Your Majesty! Go!”
“That means you too, Memil!” I added.
“You should take a moment to think very carefully about why I’m acting this way,” said Memil. “That is, *after* Eris perforates you.”
“Hey!” I shouted, but she didn’t listen.
The queen and the maid were in hot pursuit. Eris fired a rain of bullets while Memil’s skillful driving kept them in range. My hands were full just trying to keep us safe.
Greed simply laughed. “Look at you, Mr. Popular. I’m almost jealous.”
“Are you for real? Look at her back there! I could be killed!”
“Her love is a heavy weight to bear.”
“And her trigger finger is entirely too light!”
Greed cackled more laughter.
“This is no laughing matter, Greed!”
Meanwhile, Roxy struggled to keep control of the bike as it barreled down the cliff face. “Fay! I can’t handle it! We’re going to flip out of control!”
“Not with the auto-stabilizer we won’t!”
“But…”
“I have an idea.” I sheathed Greed and once again put my hands over Roxy’s. “We’re getting out of here at top speed. I’m going to need you to put all the magic you’ve got into this!”
“Got it!”
We poured our magic into the motorcycle, revving it to its limits. As we did, a bluish-white light illuminated the crevices of the otherwise jet-black motorbike. Memil was on the motorbike behind us, but she didn’t have nearly the magic power that Roxy and I had together. Even if Eris decided to give her a helping hand, we would still be far off into the horizon by the time she did.
Our motorbike hit the base of the cliff in an instant, and we sped off across the plains ahead.
“Now *this* is fast!” I said.
“It’s hard to believe a vehicle like this even exists!” said Roxy.
The bike sped along at such speed, it kicked up huge clouds of dust behind it. Memil and Eris were little more than a speck behind us, and soon they dropped out of sight completely.

“Whew, looks like we finally escaped those barbarians,” I said.
“It sure looks like it, but still… I don’t think it’s very nice to call them that.”
“Well, Eris did shoot at us.”
“That’s true… However, I still don’t think we should call them names. They’re here to help you, after all.”
“All right, all right. So, uh…should we wait for them here, then?”
“No, we decided to rendezvous at the old Lanchester estate.” She peeked back at me and cheekily poked out her tongue. “So let’s meet with them there.”
Roxy always came across as conscientious, but she knew how to get her own way when she wanted. I remembered that look on her face from back when I was a servant. It was the same face she wore when she’d dressed up as a typical commoner and gone on an adventure in town. Just remembering it made me burst out laughing.
“What’s got you all in hysterics now?” she asked.
“I was just thinking of examples of you being you, that’s all.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?!”
“I don’t mean it in a bad way. I’m just glad you’re you.”
“Hm. Well, in that case, I suppose that’s acceptable.”
Somewhat mollified by my reply, Roxy returned her focus to the matter of getting used to driving the motorcycle. It seemed like our death-defying plunge down the cliffs had paid off, because she showed marked improvement compared to when we began. It seemed safe for me to take my hands off the handlebars and leave her to it, but Roxy asked me to keep them there.
“If you don’t mind, will you keep helping me, at least until the old Lanchester estate?” she asked.
“Sure.”
For a time, we rode like that, the grassy plains whipping by. There was still no sign of Memil and Eris. We’d put some serious distance between us.
As I looked back, Roxy giggled. “I’m glad I came along.”
“Hm?”
“I know it’s a bit sudden, but I really am. I’m glad. I’m happy I can travel with you, Fay. And…” Roxy paused for a moment, her eyes still staring straight ahead. “I’m sick of being left out. I don’t want to be stuck somewhere safe while you and the others are out there fighting. I won’t do it. It’s horrible to be left there, waiting.”
“Roxy…”
“I know I’m not nearly as strong as you, and I was so grateful when you saved me from the Divine Dragon. Yet I also felt so distant from you in that moment. Even now, I still don’t have the power to face something like the dragon.” The bike picked up speed as Roxy poured more magic into it. “But I realized that if I keep thinking like that, I’d never be able to leave the kingdom. I’m so sorry you had to see me all depressed when everyone else put forth so much effort into your farewell party.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I knew you were worried, but I didn’t know what to do about it.”
“Knowing whether or not I had it in me to go with you… It was a problem I had to face myself.”
“I…”
“But I’m happy. I’m happy that you welcomed me into your party, even though I’m still so powerless.”
I took a hand off one handlebar and put it on Roxy’s shoulder. “You’re not powerless. Not in the slightest. You saved me on countless occasions. I should be the one telling you how grateful *I* am. Having you here with me, it gives me confidence. And…”
“And?”
“And I’m happy that we can finally travel together too.”
“Fay…”
Roxy let her cheek rest on the hand I’d placed on her shoulder, a gesture full of warmth. I wished we could have stayed like this forever, but the Lanchester estate loomed in the distance.

Chapter 9:
The Old Lanchester Estate

WE REACHED THE GREAT WALLS that surrounded the old Lanchester estate and stopped the bike.
Roxy looked up at them. “I heard the holy knight who once governed this estate passed away after some sort of incident.”
“Yeah…”
It was difficult for me to answer, given that I was partially responsible for the aforementioned incident. The former owner of the estate, Rudolph Lanchester, had stood before the throne and denounced my name. The idiot had even been bold enough to unsheathe his sword in front of Eris, though I hadn’t known she was the queen at the time. In the end, Lanchester was put to death by the two white knights who stood by Eris’s side.
“The citizens here were subjected to a strictly enforced class system. But because of Eris, the Lanchester family is no more. I’ve heard that in their absence, the kingdom sent another holy knight to govern the estate.”
“Yes. Eris even mentioned that she wanted to see how things were going.”
We had left Eris and Memil in our dust, so they were still making their way here. “It’s quiet. There’s no evidence of merchants coming or going…”
“It’s just like the Seifort goblin incident.”
“Now that you mention it, it is eerily similar.”
Merchants were very sensitive to danger. However much they hungered for profit, they still valued their own lives above trade. After all, what use was money after you died?
“Did something happen?”
“Hm… It would probably be best to speak to the holy knight currently in charge,” said Roxy. “However…”
“We should probably wait for Eris first.”
“Right.”
Sure, Eris flaunted her wiles and her body wherever she went, but she also managed the entire kingdom. Roxy and I were essentially her retainers, and we needed to act with the appropriate decorum in situations like this. I didn’t follow the usual protocols when dealing with Eris because we were both bearers of Skills of Mortal Sin, but it was different for Roxy. Even if Eris told her that she didn’t have to bother, Roxy was too conscientious not to show the proper respect for their positions. This respect went with Eris wherever she went.
“They’re taking their sweet time,” I said. “Let’s just go inside already.”
“No. No matter how badly she behaves, she’s still our queen.”
“No matter how badly she behaves?”
“Oh, er… That was terribly rude of me,” sputtered Roxy. “Please don’t tell Eris I said that.”

“But maybe she’d like to know,” I said, an impish grin on my face.
“Fay!”
Roxy was still getting used to Eris and her *unique* personality. Rumor had it that working for Eris back in the castle of Seifort was just as troublesome.
“Hey! Fay! Are you listening to me?!”
I was just thinking about how much pressure Roxy was under, even though she always tried her best. Roxy stared at me, her face knotted with frustration. She looked just as cute even when she was irritated.
“Fay!” she yelled, then pinched my ear.
“Ouch! Ouch! Okay! I’m listening!”
She never went easy on me in these situations. As I rubbed my stinging ear, the two of us looked back up at the walls surrounding the Lanchester estate.
Roxy went on to tell me that she’d never actually been inside the estate proper. When Myne and I had passed through, we’d gotten into a minor disagreement with Rudolph, and Myne had simply sent him flying through the air. As a result, the estate had become especially strict with regards to visiting adventurers. Furthermore, the Lanchesters and the Harts weren’t on the friendliest terms. So when Roxy had reached the town on her expedition to Galia, she’d asked for aid and been given the most meager of supplies, while her army was outright forbidden entry.
“I couldn’t believe they were treating us like that,” said Roxy.
“Sorry. I really should apologize given my role in the whole ordeal. I’ll be sure to tell Myne too.”
“It wasn’t your fault. Rudolph was a problem long before that. I’m willing to bet that he picked a fight.”
“Well, yeah. You’ve pretty much hit the nail on the head.”
Rudolph had treated Myne like a child. But the real kicker was that he’d mocked the one thing Myne felt insecure about—her chest. That had truly sealed his fate. In the next moment, Myne sent him flying through the air with her black axe. I remembered the bone-chilling shock I’d felt as I watched, mouth agape. The next thing I knew, Myne was dragging me away from the scene of the crime as we made a hasty getaway.
“Judging by that sigh, it wasn’t easy for you either,” said Roxy.
“If you push Myne around, she always pushes back. It’s her personality,” I said. “But I’ve been dragged into so many incidents because of it…”
“Sounds like she has quite the temper.”
“You don’t know the half of it. But she *is* the bearer of Wrath. Come to think of it, I don’t actually know much about the Wrath skill.”
“Oh? Is that so?” Roxy’s eyes widened. Her eyes bored into me, unblinking, and I felt suddenly awkward.
“Well, how do I put it… It’s like nobody wants to talk about their skills *or* their past.”

“Well, they are unique skills, which probably makes them a sore subject. And the past… Well, everybody’s got something they don’t want to talk about. It’s even harder if those memories are painful…”
“Yeah.”
Even having told Roxy all this, in truth, Luna had told me a great deal about Myne the night prior. She’d said the same thing as Roxy. Myne had been alive so long that she had become incredibly stubborn, so Luna had revealed all in her stead.
“When I next see Myne, I’ll do my best to get her to open up a little,” I said.
“That’s my Fay! You’re such a good boy!” Roxy grinned as she patted me tenderly on the head.
“Why do I always feel like you treat me like a kid?”
“It’s because I’m older than you.”
“By one year. Only one year.”
“That still makes me older.”
Roxy was in high spirits. I couldn’t help but wonder if she sometimes saw me like an annoying little brother. I was about to ask when we heard the thrum of a motorcycle in the distance. It looked like Eris, an *actual* elder with who-knew-how-many years on me, and Memil, a year younger than me, had finally caught up.
“Master!” cried Memil. “How could you abandon us like that?”
“I concur!” shouted Eris. “You blasted off at such speed, you left Memil completely magically drained!”
Their brows were pinched together, clearly furious over being left behind.
“What are you talking about?! Anybody in their right mind would run away from a storm of bullets!”
“They were bullets of love aimed for your heart, my darling.”
“Even so-called ‘bullets of love’ could’ve killed me!”
It didn’t matter *what* the bullets were filled with; they’d still have left me a bloody mess! With that sinister grin on Eris’s face, it was hard to believe that she was joking. Memil, sitting at the front of the cycle, wore a precisely identical bloodthirsty expression. She was sure to come for me when night fell.
In the midst of this tense atmosphere, Roxy stepped between us and bowed deferentially to Eris. “My apologies. I’m still not used to handling nor driving these motorcycles…”
“It’s not your fault,” replied Eris. “It’s all *Fate’s* fault. Isn’t that right, Memil?”
“Exactly as you say, Your Majesty!”
It seemed that Eris and Memil had somehow formed a stronger bond in the time they’d spent left behind. How was I supposed to handle a tag team of two strong-willed young women like this? I shivered just thinking about it and tried to put it out of my mind. At least I felt reassured by the fact that I’d share a room with Roxy going forward. Even though that inspired its own unique anxieties, I knew she would protect me from the others.

“I think that’s enough from the two of you for now,” said Roxy. “We’ve made it all the way to Lanchester before noon, and it would be wise for us not to waste time, don’t you think?”
“Good point…” Eris and Memil muttered.
I still kept my eye on the two of them as I pushed my bike around to the gates into the old estate. Memil followed after me, pushing the other bike, while Eris and Roxy trailed behind her. Eris and Memil exchanged many animated words with Roxy. I was far enough ahead that I couldn’t hear them, but I noticed Roxy blushed with each new comment. I swallowed my concerns and hurried on.
Soldiers guarded the main gates. We showed them the royal seal on the motorbikes and introduced ourselves as holy knights, and the guards let us in without issue. The guards had received word that Eris would be visiting to inspect the estate.
“We’ve been expecting you,” said one of the guards. “I’ll call for Lord LeChoix at once!”
“Understood.”
“So, this is a magitech bike…” said another guard with a whistle of admiration. “I’ve heard the stories. Please feel free to deposit them here.”
The guard directed us to a safe spot within the estate to leave the bikes. While Memil and I went to do so, we became aware of the large garrison of soldiers within the estate. The air practically crackled with tension, like every fighter was on guard, expecting the worst.
The town past the gates was blanketed in quiet. As I pushed my bike through the streets, I noticed that there were hardly any townsfolk walking about. In their place, countless soldiers shuffled back and forth, boiling over with anxiety. When Memil and I returned, the new lord of Lanchester had arrived to meet us. She was a girl with a head of scruffy short hair, and she seemed short of breath, as if she sprinted all the way here. Perhaps it was her youthful appearance, but there was something about her that struck me as unreliable.
“My apologies that I could not greet you at the gates! My name is LeChoix Bellisario, and I am charged with governing this region. I sensed your presence and knew you were approaching, but…”
LeChoix seemed genuinely distraught. Something was bothering her. I decided to fill her silence with the question that was on all of our minds.
“What’s going on here? Judging by the state of the town, it’s obvious something’s happened.”
The gates should have been crowded with merchants coming and going, but at present there was only LeChoix, our party of four, and soldiers. The largely deserted townscape made clear that they weren’t dealing with an ordinary problem.
“A monster has appeared to the east of the town, in the desert,” said LeChoix.
“Monsters?! As in large hordes of sandmen?”

“No.”
“Another sand golem, then?”
“Unfortunately not. I’m a holy knight, and monsters of that level would cause me no trouble.”
The previous lord of the Lanchester estate, Rudolph, had struggled with the sand golem. The monster was cunning and intelligent, and it had a habit of disappearing into the sand when it knew the battle was lost. I had assumed that another could be causing similar trouble, but that wasn’t the case. I also seemed to have underestimated LeChoix based on her appearance. Her power was clear in how confidently she declared those monsters beneath her level.
“Then can you tell us what kind of monster you’re dealing with?”
“It has gigantic pincer-like claws, and it moves across the desert with astounding speed. What’s more, its body is so tough that not even the blade of a holy sword can leave a scratch. We’ve been looking for some kind of weak point, but…we can’t find any information on the monster in any of our books.”
“I see…”
It was possible that it was an ancient monster, a creature that should have been extinct. If there was no recorded history of it, then it was safe to assume that the Door to Distant Lands had brought it back to life. When I glanced at Roxy and the others, it was clear they’d come to the same conclusion.
“In that case, let us handle the beast,” I said. “You haven’t been in charge here long, and it looks like you’ve had your hands full.”
“Really?! You’d do that for us?”
“Leave it to us!”
LeChoix cried out in relief. “Thank you so much! I’ve been so worried!”
She grabbed a hold of my hands and began waving them excitedly. The next thing I knew, she was so close that she was practically hugging me. I understood then how heavily the issue had weighed on her mind.

If this was an incident related to the Door to Distant Lands, then it was our duty to handle it.
But then I felt the cold, piercing gaze of the rest of the party cutting into me. Memil bared her fangs just enough for me to notice. Meanwhile, Eris rested her hand on the handle of her gunblade, and even Roxy wore a smile that did nothing to disguise the disapproval in her eyes.
The cold of night had yet to fall, but I felt a clear chill in the air.
Greed cackled. "It ain't easy being popular!"
"I didn't ask for this!" I protested.
"Oh, I know what it is! It's because you received the title of Blessed Blade from Aaron. That must have raised your appeal."
"You better be joking, Greed."
"And? Does it matter? Rejoice, Fate! But also be careful you don't get stabbed in the back by one of your traveling companions."
True, even though Aaron was an older man, he was something of a hit with ladies. Could it be that his title had something to do with it? *No…that makes no sense.*
Before I could consider the matter any longer, LeChoix took me by my hand and led me to the manor. "This way, my lord!"
"No need to pull! I can walk!"
"It's so wonderful to finally have such a trustworthy gentleman to rely on!"
It seemed she was very much unwilling to let go of me now that she had finally found the help she sought. Either way, I wanted to learn more about the monster that had appeared, and it seemed that the manor would be the best place for that. As LeChoix pulled me along, I glanced behind me.
"Fay…" muttered Roxy.
"Looks like someone wants another shower of love bullets," said Eris.
"Master," said Memil, "prepare yourself, for tonight, I feast!"
My spine was pure ice. I wanted to think it was an illusion, but I swore I saw a sinister black aura emanating around the three of them as they followed behind me. I turned away, setting such thoughts aside, and let LeChoix lead the way to the manor in the distance.

Chapter 10:
The Holy Knight LeChoix

LECHOIX PULLED ME into the residential district. During my last visit to Lanchester, I hadn't been allowed into this area and had instead been directed to stay at accommodations specifically built away from the residents. This was because Rudolph Lanchester had enforced a strict class hierarchy throughout his entire domain. Only residents had been allowed inside; everybody else was forbidden entry. Rudolph had personally decided on the laws that had governed the estate.

However, the estate was a very different place now. The gloom that once pervaded the town had receded considerably. The few people who walked the streets seemed free and at ease, but that only highlighted the new burden they carried.

"I sense fear in the populace," I said.

"Yes, it's because I'm not strong enough. We still have a stockpile of food and supplies, so there's nothing to worry about in that respect, but…"

"But the threat of the monster in the desert looms. I know this feeling. Not so long ago, that afflicted the kingdom too."

"I heard about that from the regular communiqués we receive from the kingdom… But what in the world is happening?"

"That's what we're here to discover. We intend to stop this calamity before it gets any worse."

LeChoix turned to me with an apologetic look on her face, still pulling me along by hand as we walked. "Please forgive me. If I were only more powerful, I wouldn't have to burden you with such an onerous task…"

"Listen, don't worry about it. There's no point putting an end to this calamity if it means we lose what we're trying to protect. That includes you, as well all the people in this estate."

"My lord…" LeChoix looked back at Roxy, Eris, and Memil, who all nodded in agreement. "Thank you so much, everyone."

The manor to which we were headed had formerly belonged to Rudolph Lanchester, but now it served as the home base for LeChoix and her troops. The manor was so big, I almost mistook it for a castle when I first laid eyes on it.

"If this manor symbolized anything, it was excess," said LeChoix. "Come on, this way."

LeChoix led the way inside to a huge guest room. The maids had already prepared it for our arrival, placing drinks and light snacks in front of each chair around the table. When I thanked LeChoix for her hospitality, she giggled.

"Well, not only are you a holy knight, my lord, but you also belong to one of the five esteemed families. I hadn't expected you to be so humble."

“I’m Aaron Barbatos’s adopted son; before that, I was a simple commoner. The truly esteemed yet humble one here is Roxy,” I said, looking at her where she was seated to my left.
“I wouldn’t go that far,” she demurred.
“But I always looked up to you, Roxy. You treated me like an equal, even when I was a nobody standing guard at the gates.”
“Fay…” Roxy’s face flushed as she slapped my shoulder bashfully. “Why would you go saying things like that at a place like this?”
A sharp stab of pain interrupted me as Eris, sitting to my right, dug her elbow into my ribs.
“Ouch! What the hell was that for?!”
“Do you two have to get started with that lovey-dovey crap all over again?! I mean seriously, get a room. Have you completely forgotten why we’re here in the first place? Well?”
“Sorry, Eris…” Roxy and I said in unison.
“You two better listen to Her Majesty!” said Memil. “It’s reached the point that I can barely stand to watch you two!”
Even Memil backed us into a corner. I grew self-conscious. It wasn’t like I was doing anything on purpose. Roxy looked exactly how I felt.
“Sorry, Memil…” we said together.
“Well, as long as you’re aware of it!”
Memil put on an obvious performance of her outrage, to which Eris gave an indignant nod of approval. Whenever they got like this, they were almost too much to handle! Roxy and I exchanged a glance and sighed as LeChoix looked on and laughed.
“My apologies,” she said. “I don’t mean to be rude.”
“No, it’s fine,” I said. “It’s always like this.”
“Really? But in a way, I’m quite relieved.”
“Relieved?”
LeChoix looked at us with a touch of seriousness spreading across her face.
“It’s just, I thought that Her Majesty would be a more fearsome, imposing figure. She’s the queen of the entire kingdom, after all.”
“Well best get rid of that idea,” said Eris. “I’m the pinnacle of kindness. And a pacifist, to boot.”
What?! I thought back on the rain of bullets I had to dodge earlier. Those doubts crept onto my face as I stared at Eris, my eyes widening. Suddenly, I felt her foot stomp on my own under the table.
“Ouch!” I cried.
“What’s wrong, my lord?!” asked LeChoix. “Are you okay?”
“I’m…fine. I’m fine. Please, continue.”
“Er, yes. Very well.”
Being in a group conversation with Eris was nerve-wracking. In any case, LeChoix went on heaping praise on Eris, and Eris loved every minute of it.

Sometimes this girl is such a child, I thought, and Eris's foot once again slammed down on my own under the table. Does she have the Telepathy skill or what?!
"Lady Roxy, you're exactly the way everybody describes you," said LeChoix. "We actually met once, in Seifort castle."
"Oh? Is that so?"
"Uh…Well, it's kind of embarrassing, but we met right after I was promoted to holy knight. I got lost. I was stumbling around the castle, and you, uh…"
"Oh!" Roxy said, suddenly remembering. "That was you? I didn't recognize you!"
"Thank you once again for giving me directions. I was so embarrassed by the whole situation that I ran away as quickly as I could. I'm sorry, it must have seemed so rude."
"It's fine, it's fine. But you've certainly…grown into…your own woman…"
As Roxy finished her sentence, her eyes seemed to linger on LeChoix's breasts.
Hm? What's this?
Roxy became aware of my gaze and quickly glanced away, her face glowing red.
Is this because… Wait, Fate. No need to chase that thought.
Even I understood the meaning of Roxy's lingering, jealous glance. Even so, she was Lady Aisha's daughter, so I didn't think she had anything to worry about. It was all just a matter of time. As I sat there, imagining the future, Roxy suddenly pinched my side.
"Ouch! Roxy?" I stammered.
She glowered at me—fiery eyes narrowed. "You and I are going to have a talk later. Is that clear?"
"Y-yes, Roxy…"
I had no idea what such a talk would entail. The only Roxy I really knew was the kind, gentle Roxy with the beautiful smile. That she would bring this up at a time like this left my heart pounding a nervous staccato.
But just as with Eris, LeChoix watched and laughed. "You two really get along like a house on fire, don't you?"
Roxy and I looked at each other for a moment. There was nothing we could do but laugh sheepishly.
"May I ask you something, my lord?" LeChoix went on.
"Sure. What is it?"
"Is it true that you killed the Divine Dragon by yourself?"
"Well, it's a little complicated. I kind of did, and I kind of didn't."
"What do you mean?" LeChoix asked, her head tilted to the side.
"I wasn't really alone." I placed my black sword on the table, "I had the help of this sword, Greed. I couldn't have done it without him. And even after I killed the Divine Dragon, things kept spiraling out of control. That was when Roxy saved me. So even though you could technically say that I fought the dragon by myself, I don't feel like that's the whole truth."

“Ah, I see what you mean. But the one who *actually* did the killing was you, right?”
“Uh…yes.”
LeChoix giggled. “You really *are* humble, aren’t you?”
“Uh…thank you.”
It was a funny feeling to be praised. I still wasn’t used to it, but it made me feel warm.
LeChoix turned her attention to the group as a whole and leaped into an explanation of the problem at hand. “Let me tell you everything we know about the monster that appeared in the east. It was first spotted roughly two weeks ago. It attacks with giant pincer-like claws, and so far, all of our attacks have proved useless. We believe that it might be as powerful as the Divine Dragon. There’s one more thing to note: When the monster appears, the sandmen in the desert change form. They become much more violent.”
LeChoix breathed out a sigh, her brow knitted together.
So, the monster here was in the Domain of E. If it had come back to life through the power of the Door, that maybe wasn’t entirely surprising. This meant that only Eris and I would be able to take it down.
“When does the monster usually appear?” I asked.
“Midnight or later. It’s large enough that we can see it from the estate.”
I looked out the window. The sun was just beginning to set in the distance.
“So we still have some time, at least.”
Time that would be more than enough for us to prepare for a night battle.
“In that case, I’m going to get some sleep,” said Eris, also looking out the window. “Nothing more important before a battle than rest.”
“You sound like Myne,” I said.
“It’s just the basics of battle, my dear. You look like you could use some rest yourself.”
“I think I’d prefer to relax by going out and wandering the town.”
“Well, whatever works. Call me when it’s time to leave. Memil, shall we?”
“Yes, Your Majesty.”
Memil likely wouldn’t take part in the battle. Now that her holy knight status had been revoked, she was forbidden to engage in violence. She was also banned from using a holy sword unless it was specifically to protect me in times of dire emergency. When I had gone into battle against the goblin shaman, Memil had broken these rules to help me. However, even then, she was still punished, and the white knights of Seifort had made sure she didn’t forget that. She’d gotten away with a slap on the wrist that time, but if she kept using her holy knight powers, the punishments would likely become more severe. I didn’t want Memil to go through any more of that than was absolutely necessary.
I turned to Roxy as Eris and Memil left the room. “What about you?” I asked. “Do you want to come for a walk?”
“We’ve got a big battle ahead of us, so I think I’ll spend some time by myself.”

“Okay.”
So Roxy intended to join us in the battle against a monster in the Domain of E, did she? I opened my mouth, but I couldn’t find the right words to stop her, so I decided to slip out quietly instead.
As I did, I spoke to LeChoix, my voice no louder than a whisper. “Will you keep an eye on Roxy for me?”
“Understood. I’m not sure how much help I’ll be, but I’ll try my hardest!”
I remembered what Roxy had told me, that because she wasn’t powerful enough, she would only get in our way. I didn’t think that was quite true.
I found myself thinking back to how I had been before my Gluttony awakened. Back then, my stats had been so abysmally low that by comparison, Roxy and the other holy knights had been like gods above the clouds. Back then, it had felt like no matter how hard I worked, I would never be able to catch up to them. Roxy probably harbored similar feelings now. I knew I was at the root of those feelings, and I didn’t want to push her into a corner. It would be better to have a fellow holy knight like LeChoix watch over her and keep her company.
“Thank you, LeChoix.”
I left the manor and walked toward the lights of the town as night fell.
“To be blunt, I thought that even if Roxy said something like that, you’d stay with her,” said Greed.
“It would have been no use,” I replied. “She’s strong-willed. When she says she wants to be alone, she means it.”
“But you still asked that young holy knight to keep an eye on her, huh?”
“Well, I just want to be sure.”
Greed knew me better than I knew myself, sometimes. We’d been together a long time now.
“I want to spend some time wandering the town before we head into battle,” I said. “You think there’s an outdoor stall somewhere selling something delicious? I’m also curious about the rest of the town; it was off-limits the last time we came here.”
“Hate to slap you in the face with reality while you’re in such high spirits, but aren’t you forgetting something?”
“What?”
“That monster you’re fighting tonight has practically frozen local trade. Don’t expect much opportunity for tourism.”
“Oh. Oh! Ugh,” I groaned. “Damn it, you’re right. Nothing will be open!”
“What in the world would you do without your truest friend, the mighty Greed? You’d be lost!”
“I was just a little forgetful, okay? That’s it!”
“Yeah, yeah.”
“Don’t ‘yeah, yeah’ me! It’s the truth!”
We’d been together a long time, all right. And Greed hadn’t changed a bit.

Either way, it was no use worrying about Roxy. She was with us, and that was that. The best I could do was create an opportunity for her in the battle ahead so that she'd come out of it with something.

However, I still felt apprehensive about Roxy entering the Domain of E. I kept thinking back to Greed's words: *The Domain of E is a place beyond humanity*.

I couldn't help but wonder… Aaron and I had formed a bond that allowed him to enter the Domain of E. Was my apprehension the reason that Roxy and I hadn't been able to forge a similar tie?

Chapter 11:
A Reunion by Moonlight

PERHAPS UNSURPRISINGLY, the town was as silent as the grave that evening. In the past, outsiders had strictly been forbidden entry, but even now that the city was free from Rudolph Lanchester's iron fist, it was hard to argue that the situation had improved. When LeChoix had led us to the manor, townsfolk were out and about, milling around, but now that night had fallen, everyone had shut themselves in their homes.

The reason for the silence was clear: the ancient monster in the desert terrified the locals. It was a monster perhaps as powerful as the Divine Dragon. Monsters in the Domain of E could only be harmed by others in the Domain of E. Anything less wouldn't even leave a scratch. In a worst-case scenario, the only thing the townspeople could do was run, hide, and hope they didn't get in the monster's way. The air over the town was thick with fear.

"So much for food at an outdoor stall," I muttered.

"If there's nothing open on the main street, nothing will be open anywhere else either," said Greed.

I groaned. "I was *really* looking forward to trying some desert cuisine. Who knows what specialties they have here!"

"Maybe you could ask LeChoix?"

"No, she's got her hands full just worrying about the monster. And I've already asked her to look after Roxy. I can't impose on her any further, especially if it's for something as selfish as wanting to try the local specialty."

"Aren't you the one fighting the monster? Doesn't that give you the right to throw your weight around? Tell her to bring you some food."

"Looks like you've got me confused with yourself. You know that's not my style." I gave Greed a couple light slaps to calm his haranguing.

As I walked down the main street, my attention was drawn to a narrow alleyway on my right. I peered in, but it was too dark for me to discern anything.

"Something wrong, Fate?"

"Just…a gut feeling."

Something about that alleyway captivated me. It wasn't concrete or visible. Rather, it was a sensation that pushed me onward, urging me deeper into the darkness of the narrow street.

"That kind of feeling rarely leads to anything good, Fate," warned Greed.

"I still have to see what's down there." I knew Greed spoke from a place of experience, but all the same, I took a tentative step into that dark alley, where even the moonlight refused to shine.

"Fate, you have the Night Vision skill for a reason."

“Would you give it a rest? I was just about to use it.”
“Sure you were. Ever since the day we met, I’ve had to look out for you at every step. You’re like a forgetful little baby who doesn’t know left from right.”
“Sounds rough,” I said with a chuckle.
“Don’t try to laugh it off!”
Greed continued to complain, so I did as he said and used my Night Vision. As I crept farther into the alleyway, I spotted two figures in black. They were speaking, but I couldn’t make out what they were saying. From their silhouettes and equipment, I could tell they were adventurers. However, they were obviously of a much higher level than most of their brethren. For some reason, even with my Night Vision, the area around the two figures remained cloaked in shadow.
Why isn’t my skill working?
This had happened once before. It was similar to when I’d first tried to use the Identify skill on Myne. Though I knew almost nothing about the two figures shrouded in darkness, I knew I had to be careful. I pressed against an alley wall, hiding in the shadows, and tried to eavesdrop on their conversation.
I still couldn’t tell what they were saying, but as a holy knight, I had the right to take any suspicious individuals into custody. I edged closer, coming to the decision that I would find out what they were up to by confronting them directly. But the two figures seemingly noticed me before I moved another inch, and they began to move away. However, the alleyway was so narrow that they couldn’t escape easily. If I needed to, I could stop them with my overwhelming power.
“Hey! Stop!” I shouted.
One of the figures continued to walk, vanishing into the darkness of the alleyway. I tried to give chase, but the remaining figure turned to face me, blocking my path.
“Fate, wait,” they said.
I knew that voice. My feet froze mid-stride at the sound of it. I turned to stare intently at the face, still shrouded in darkness. For a time, we stood there in silence. As the moonlight filtered through the clouds, the face before me grew clearer.
“Dad…”
My father had disappeared without a trace when he took Laine and the Philosopher’s Stone from Seifort. I couldn’t have imagined that he would turn up here. I choked back the feelings that boiled in the pit of my stomach and leaped backward, putting some distance between us.
“Hm? What’s the matter? Afraid you’ll catch something, Fate?”
“Don’t play dumb with me. Where’s Laine? What are you doing here?” I spoke quickly, unsheathing Greed as I did so.
“Why the rush? The night’s still young.”
“Dad!”

He didn’t pull his spear out of the air. Rather, he walked toward me as I pointed Greed at him, a look of unshakeable confidence on his face. He was calm and collected, as though he were dealing with a child.
“Calm down, Fate. First things first. You can rest easy knowing that Laine is in my care.”
“In your *care*? You kidnapped her!”
“I regret that, but I was left with no other choice. That said, things have changed now. After hearing what I had to say, she travels with me of her own volition.”
“What the hell?”
“Our interests align.”
What could that mean? How could Laine want the same thing as my father?
Seeing that I was at least listening to what he had to say, my father continued. “As for the rest, I can’t say. Not about the Philosopher’s Stone, and not about what I’m doing here.”
“Dad!”
But it seemed clear that my father was done listening. As I stood there with the black sword unsheathed, somehow powerless to move, my father strode past me with slow, deliberate steps.
“Fate,” he said as he passed, “didn’t I tell you to leave me alone?”
“What did you expect? I wasn’t going to just sit back and twiddle my thumbs at the castle!”
“I see. You’ve grown into your own man. Well, I suppose it has been five years, hasn’t it? Actually, it’s closer to six, isn’t it?” My father laughed as walked on, his back facing me. “I have one more thing to tell you. Leave it alone—that monster in the desert.”
“Why?”
“That monster and I, I suppose you could call us old acquaintances. It’s far beyond your capabilities as you are now.”
“You don’t know that. I’m in the—”
“Domain of E? In which case, let me be clearer. It’s not about how high your stats are anymore, it’s about your mastery of skills and how you wield them in battle.”
“You think I don’t know that?”
“Perhaps. But know this: Your Gluttony feeds on the souls of the defeated, and their power becomes your power. From here on out, there’s nothing but the Domain of E, and those souls will come with a torment beyond imagination. Perhaps some of your skills can stifle it somewhat, but beware your stats growing to the point where you can no longer control them.”
I took a step toward my father, but he maintained the distance between us.
“Fate, if you insist on fighting that monster, then listen well. What you are about to face is known as a holy beast. It’s a special type of monster with divine protection. Even the Weapon of Mortal Sin you carry will be useless in a direct attack. Well? Knowing that, will you still fight it?”
“My mind is made up.”

“I see. Of course it is. I heard about how you defeated the Divine Dragon from Laine. If you’re willing to risk your life on something as reckless as that, then it only makes sense that you won’t listen to good advice. Still, try not to be careless. Your body is already transforming, isn’t it?”
“Did you hear that from Laine too?”
“She’s worried about you, Fate. As am I.”
My father walked away, but I wasn’t about to let him go yet, even if I had to use force. Even as I thought this, my father seemed to read my mind.
“Personally, I prefer it when kids can just be kids, you know?” he said.
“Dad, wait!”
He pulled his spear from thin air, and tendrils of cold seeped into the air around it. However, he kept his back to me and made no effort to enter a battle stance.
“Fate, if we fought here, if we fought seriously… You know what would happen to this place.”
My jaw clenched, grinding my teeth together.
“Are you willing to do that to stop me?”
“Grrr…”
“That’s my boy.”
It was as though he had taken the population of the town hostage. My hands were tied. Even so, I suspected that he was bluffing. When he kidnapped Laine and stole the Philosopher’s Stone, he’d frozen a host of soldiers in ice. However, after he was long gone and the ice melted, those same soldiers had been cold but otherwise unharmed. I didn’t think he would pull civilians into battle if we were to clash. The reason I let him go had more to do with the pulsing red tattoo staining his face…and the constant, dull pressure it exerted on me.
“Well, that’s about all the time I have. Be seeing you, Fate.”
With that, my father vanished into a darkness that even my Night Vision couldn’t penetrate. I just stood there, alone and unmoving. Taking deep breaths, I waited for my racing heart to calm down.
“Never thought we’d see your father here,” said Greed. “I can’t tell if your sixth sense is a blessing or a curse.”
“I’m as surprised as you are,” I said. “But I’m glad we met, all the same. At least we found out something about the monster in the desert. The holy beast.”
“Holy beasts… It just gets worse by the minute.”
“Dad said that even your blade would be useless against such a monster. Is he right?”
“Hah?! The mighty Greed, useless?! …But aside from the sheer audacity of such a comment, remember that I am no more than a weapon. I am only as effective as the one who wields me.”
“It comes down to me, then.”
“Indeed it does. It comes down to your effort, your commitment. There are some fights you won’t win by using my special skills alone, but I think that

no matter how this battle with the holy beast shakes out, you'll at least come away better prepared for future battles."
"I don't intend to fight a losing battle, Greed. Losing here means leaving the people of Lanchester with nothing but despair."
"Yeah, I know. I'm just saying you have to consider all the possibilities. Not knowing when to back off is how you lose the people closest to you. Don't forget: you're not fighting alone anymore."
"Yeah…"
I looked up at the night sky. The thick clouds from earlier had decided to make themselves scarce, leaving behind a clear indigo expanse. The full moon shone, illuminating the once gloomy alleyway.
There was still time before midnight. I had come here to clear my mind, and I intended to do just that. I left to wander and explore the quiet town.
"It's been a surprisingly busy day," said Greed. "What say we grab a drink somewhere to blow off some steam?"
"Would that I could," I said, "but we've got a battle looming on the horizon, and with a holy beast no less. I don't think it's the kind of thing we want to take on sloshed."
"I suppose so. After all, Eris would probably be pretty furious with you, and you'd be in for a scolding from Roxy, on top of that. Memil would probably suck your blood right there just for good measure!" The black sword guffawed.
"Not funny, Greed!"
It was like he didn't have the slightest care for what we would face later that evening. Then again, Greed was just a weapon. In the end, the outcome of our confrontation would come down to the one who wielded him.

Chapter 12:
Back to The Desert of Extinction

I PACED THE QUIET STREETS, calming my heart after the shock of meeting my father. Night came fast, and before I knew it, the moon shone high in the sky. The time for our hunt was fast approaching.
"Time to head back," said Greed.
"Let's go."
When I reached the manor, Eris and Roxy were ready and waiting. Eris had her gunblade equipped and a haughty, unimpressed look on her face, probably because I was a little late.
"Thought you weren't going to show," she said.
"Sorry. You wouldn't believe what happened."
"Whatever it was, it better explain why you're late."
I looked at Eris and Roxy, then Memil and LeChoix behind them, and a twinge of hesitation stalled me. This felt like a private problem—a problem between a father and his son. But when I met Roxy's gaze, I knew I couldn't hide it.
"I saw my father again," I said.
"Huh?!" Eris's eyes widened.
Likewise, Roxy put a hand to her mouth in surprise, worry filling her eyes.
"Are you okay? You didn't fight him?"
"It didn't come to that. If it had, you would have heard it."
"The city would be a shambles," added Eris. "So what? Did your dad have something to say?"
"I got some information, but I don't know how much we can trust it. He said that Laine is safe. He claims she's actually traveling with him of her own free will now."
Relief flowed into Roxy and Memil's faces, their shoulders no longer tense. Laine had given them both a great deal of help. Her insight had enabled Roxy and I to return to our original bodies, and her research had allowed Memil to understand and control her Blood Lust. Consequently, they both knew Laine well, and her safety had weighed on their minds since the day of her kidnapping.
"I'm so relieved," said Roxy.
"I also learned something about the monster in the desert. According to my father, it's called a holy beast."
"A holy beast?!" Eris seemed to freeze at the mere mention of that phrase. She wasn't one to show her true emotions easily, so her reaction worried Roxy and Memil. Even LeChoix, who barely knew Eris at all, seemed shaken by her reaction.
"What's wrong, Eris? Do you know about such creatures?"

“I… I do. To think, a holy beast,” she murmured. Her mouth contorted into an uncertain frown as she looked up at the midnight sky. “I’m sorry, but only Fate and I can manage this battle. The rest of you will only get in our way.”
“What?” Roxy cried, unable to disguise her dismay.
She had prepared for battle only to be told to stay out of it. Roxy was well aware that she couldn’t fight on the front lines because she wasn’t in the Domain of E, but I knew she had intended to play a support role. Now Eris was telling her that she couldn’t even do that. Nonetheless, however she felt, these words came from the queen herself, and Roxy couldn’t protest.
I still wanted answers. “What are you talking about? Why?”
“A holy beast is…not just a monster in the Domain of E,” said Eris. “Can you guarantee her protection? If you can’t, then she’s better off left behind. That’s all I’m telling you.”
“I *will* protect Roxy. No matter what.” I clenched my fist. “But it’s not just a holy beast we’re dealing with. There’s also the desert sandmen that have grown more aggressive.”
I glanced at LeChoix for confirmation, and she nodded.
“If Roxy doesn’t take care of the sandmen, we won’t be able to dedicate our focus to the holy beast.”
“Fay…” Roxy knew better than anyone that in terms of stats, she lagged behind the rest of us. But as she opened her mouth to speak, I put a hand up to stop her.
I turned to Eris to continue explaining my reasoning.
Before I could, however, she stepped close to me, leaned in, and whispered in my ear, “Listen to me well. If you intend to bring her with us, and into battle, then make sure you’re prepared for the worst.”
“You mean…”
“You know what I mean,” interrupted Eris. “If she tells you she wants to form a bond, then be sure you are ready to do what’s needed. There’s always the risk that she loses control and falls into Soul Decay.”
Soul Decay: the phenomenon that had transformed Rafale and Hado into wretched monsters when their souls couldn’t handle the raw power of the Domain of E. If Roxy formed a bond with me and fell into Soul Decay, if she became a monster…
I could barely bring myself to think about it.
If I grew any closer to her—if such a bond was formed—there was no telling what would happen to my own body as my Gluttony ravened for her even more.
“If it comes to that, I will do what I have to,” I said. “But I need a little time.”
“I’d love to tell you to go ahead, but it’s not my decision. It’s Roxy’s.”
She was exactly right. I cast a glance at Roxy. We were about to face a monster we knew nothing about, but her eyes burned with resolve. When she caught my gaze, she nodded.

When Eris noticed the strength in her eyes, she punched me lightly in the stomach. “Fine. You keep an eye on her, and she can come along. I want to see her skills for myself, anyway.” Having said her piece, Eris walked away from me and turned to everyone. With sudden frivolity, she announced, “Well, then! Let’s get to it!”
Roxy and I shouted in response as LeChoix and Memil sent us off.
“I’m sorry I don’t have the strength to aid you in your battle,” said LeChoix. “Good luck out there.”
“Master, Lady Roxy, Your Majesty! You can’t lose here! We have yet to even reach Hausen! Go take that monster down!”
“Leave it to us,” I said.
I answered with a confident swagger, not wanting them to worry, but my stomach was churning. This was a monster I knew nothing about. Even so, the tension had left Roxy’s face. I had a feeling that I would have to thank LeChoix for that—that is, if we returned from our upcoming battle safely. We waved to LeChoix and Memil, put the town behind us, and entered the desert.

***

The Lanchester estate was on the eastern border of the Desert of Extinction. A cold wind cut through the air, and sand dunes limned by silver moonlight stretched far off into the horizon. A familiar monster, a symbol of the trackless wastes before us, seemed to herald our arrival. However, the monsters were not quite as I remembered them. Roxy and Eris noticed the change too.
“There’s something off about these sandmen,” said Roxy. “They look like they’re made of rocks, and it’s like they’re cloaked in a jet-black aura or something.”
“Is it Soul Decay?”
“No, it’s something else,” said Eris. “They’ve been forced to accept the holy beast’s Divine Providence.”
“Divine Providence?”
“An effect that manifests a creature’s full potential.”
“What do you mean by that?” I asked. “It looks like a monster that simply turned into an uglier monster.”
Eris laughed. “Exactly. Because you see, not every creature is worthy of Divine Providence. If you aren’t worthy but you receive it anyway… Well, the results are right in front of you. Monsters become more monstrous. But don’t underestimate them. Fate, best use your Identify skill before they swarm us.”
“On it.”
I turned my gaze on one of the sandmen and used Identify. But something about Eris’s words nagged at me. The idea that if you weren’t worthy of Divine Providence, you instead became more monstrous. It seemed eerily

similar to the bonds made through Skills of Mortal Sin. I didn't know for certain, but it seemed to me that there was some sort of link between Skills of Mortal Sin and the holy beasts. I could *feel* it. It didn't help matters that even hearing the phrase "holy beast" had put Eris on edge.
There was no time to waste on speculation, however. I needed to understand these new sandmen and see their stats and skills. When I was last here, they were about Level 30, and their stats had hovered around the high one thousands, except for their agility, which had sat at about one hundred. This made them slow. As for skills, they had Spirit Boost (Medium).
So how about these new sandmen?

Dark Sandman Lv. 30
Vitality: 239000
Strength: 290000
Magic: 132000
Spirit: 176000
Agility: 10000
Skills: Gale Blade, Health Regen

Not only had their stats increased considerably, but the monsters now knew Gale Blade and Health Regen. I had Health Regen myself, so I knew how useful it was. With it, you could heal any non-fatal wound. But the dark sandman was not a crowned beast; it was only a mid-tier monster. A crowned beast with the Health Regen skill would be an utter nightmare. At least now I understood why these sandmen were giving LeChoix and her soldiers so much trouble.
After further analyzing the Gale Blade, I shared what I learned with Eris and Roxy.
"They're called dark sandmen, and they're a hefty step up from your regular sandmen monsters. Their strength stat is almost 300,000. But their agility is still lacking, at only 10,000. As for skills, they have Health Regen and Gale Blade, which works by creating an air vacuum that literally slices through the air. It's a long-range attack, so you have to be careful—if the monster gets in range, it will definitely try to mince you into pieces."
"You heard him, better be careful, Roxy," said Eris.
"Understood."
The information was most important for Roxy. Since Eris and I were in the Domain of E, the attacks of a dark sandman couldn't harm us. Even the Gale Blade wouldn't leave a scratch. We would feel the impact of the attack but suffer no actual damage. Even so, getting battered by wind in the middle of a battle against a holy beast could still prove to be a problem. It might even prove fatal if the holy beast took advantage of the openings it could create. That was why Roxy had to take care of the dark sandmen that surrounded the holy beast.

Eris stared closely at Roxy and finally spoke. “Roxy! Are you ready?”
“Ready for battle?”
“Indeed. But by yourself, first. I want you to show us what you can do, and I’m setting one condition before you head out there.”
“A condition?”
Eris chuckled. “All things in good time. First, listen up. We have to change how we refer to these monsters—‘dark sandman’ is too long and awkward, so we’ll stick to darkness. That’s what we call monsters that fail to receive Divine Providence. Short and sweet. Same goes for you, Fate.”
“Whatever you say,” I replied.
“Understood,” said Roxy.
Eris stared out at the darkness with a crooked grin. “You see that one out there? You have ten seconds to kill it. If you can’t do that, you’re going back to the manor.”
“Eris!” I protested. “What the hell?!”
“You heard me. If she can’t handle this level of monster, she’s only going to make the real battle more difficult. Let me be clear: When it comes to battle, I will be as strict and severe as is necessary. Roxy, what are you going to do?”
Eris’s gaze was fixed on Roxy, but Roxy didn’t flinch.
“I’ll do it. If you need to see it firsthand, then I will prove my worth in battle.”
“That’s what I like to hear! I love a girl with guts. It’s settled, then!”
Roxy unsheathed her sword and shifted into a battle stance. The darkness in the distance still hadn’t noticed us. If she closed the distance quickly and took it by surprise, ten seconds wouldn’t be an issue. However, fighting on sand was a problem. Unlike hard ground, the harder you planted your feet, the more you sank. I made a point of not telling Roxy because I wanted her to pass Eris’s test without any help.
“Good to go, Roxy?” asked Eris.
“Ready when you are.”
“Then begin!”
Perhaps it was the nerves, but Roxy almost took a tumble as she kicked off the sand. However, she quickly shifted her body weight, found her balance, and sped toward the darkness. It was hard to believe that she was running on sand with how quickly she moved. But the battle had only just begun, and there was no room for error.
I watched on silently. I believed in her. I believed she could do it.

Chapter 13:
Roxy's Limit

ROXY LEAPED IN CLOSE from the darkness's blind spot. The smallest of mistakes meant that it would notice her. I watched her actions, wishing I could join the fray beside her, but I understood that I could only observe. Roxy showed no hesitation as she brought her sword down on the monster.
"Ah, her attack only grazed it," said Eris, stating aloud what we both noticed.
Assuming the darkness was like an ordinary sandman, its weak point was a core hidden within its sandy body. The core gathered sand to create the monster's body, meaning that it was the only point where it could be killed. Roxy's opening attack had cut through only sand, and now she'd lost the element of surprise.
"She's running out of time," said Eris.
"Come on, Roxy…"
My worry proved misplaced. Roxy had accounted for the fact that her first strike might miss. The darkness tried to burrow into the sand, perhaps in an attempt to create enough distance to use Gale Blade. Roxy wouldn't let it. She used the momentum from her sword attack to spin into a kick.
Watching her seamlessly mix armed and unarmed techniques reminded me of something Aaron had told me in the past: "She's got some fancy footwork."
When Aaron sparred with Roxy, he'd had more trouble dealing with her kicks than with her sword. Now Roxy's foot drove into the sand, reaching the core of the darkness. A metallic clang rang out as the blue core of the monster shot into the sky. Because the core of the dark sandman was much tougher than that of an ordinary one, that kick wasn't enough to kill it, but as long as the core was airborne, it was helpless. Roxy leaped up and delivered a horizontal slash to cleave the core neatly into two halves that rolled across the dunes.
The whole battle had taken just under ten seconds. With that, Roxy passed Eris's test. We walked toward Roxy, but Eris's face said everything: she wasn't yet willing to praise Roxy for her success.
"Fay, Your Majesty," said Roxy. "I believe that was under ten seconds."
Roxy's shoulders tensed when she saw that the usual carefree expression on Eris's face was nowhere to be found. Eris let the silence linger for a moment before opening her mouth to speak.
"Firstly, congratulations," she said.
"Thank you."
"So much wasted movement. So much wasted energy. When I said ten seconds, I didn't mean scrape through by the skin of your teeth."
"I-I'm sorry."

Eris had expected Roxy to kill the darkness with her first strike. Roxy had passed, but Eris still harbored doubts.
“This is how I had hoped you would pass my test.”
Eris readied her gunblade, then aimed it at a darkness in the east. When she fired, the bullet flew smoothly through the air, passed straight through the darkness’s core, and shattered it into fragments.
“No wasted movement. Clean, precise. This is what I expect of you.”
“I’ll do my best…”
“What did you think, Fate? Why don’t you show Roxy how it’s done?”
“I think I’ll pass,” I said.
Eris had already shown Roxy the difference in our ability, but now she expected me to rub it in? I wasn’t for it. Eris wasn’t playing around, though; she really was as strict as she said.
I placed my hand on Roxy’s shoulder. “Eris is on another level, so don’t try to compare yourself to her. Instead…”
“I know. I get it. I’ll do the best I can. That’s all I *can* do for now.”
“We’re counting on you to take the darkness. But if you need us, just say the word.”
Roxy nodded and sheathed her holy sword. Then the three of us headed farther and farther east, to the place where the holy beast had first been sighted, according to LeChoix. The cool desert wind was bracing, and the full moon above starkly illuminated the sandy expanse. It was perfect weather for a night hunt.
Usually, conditions like these would draw adventurers to the desert like moths to a flame, but no ordinary adventurer could survive what now made the sands its home, and it was all too easy to see why.
The huge scorpion appeared before us, cresting a dune and sending sand billowing through the air. The monster’s carapace was like hardened ruby, exuding an overwhelming aura that screamed, “stay away.” Its two pincers looked like near-unbreakable bludgeons, and behind them, a massive tail swayed from side to side as if hunting for a target to pierce with the sharp stinger at its tip.

“Roxy! Eris!” I shouted. “Get ready!”
“Ready!” Roxy replied.
“Here we go…”
For some reason, Eris’s reply was enervating, but I had to focus all my attention on the monster looming before us.
I gripped the black sword. “Finally throwing down with a holy beast. You ready, Greed?”
“Ready as I’ll ever be. But there’s something off about that monster.”
“Hm?”
However, I noticed what he meant. Even though we drew our weapons, the monster paid us no heed and wandered off in an entirely arbitrary direction. A horde of darkness followed after it as though it was leading them somewhere.
“It’s like it doesn’t even know we’re here…” I said.
“Right. But holy beasts are as smart as humans, if not smarter. They can think. But this thing is acting dumber than an ordinary monster.”
“There’s no rhyme or reason to its movements.”
“I can only speculate, but it’s possible that when the Door to Distant Lands opened, it brought this holy beast back to life, but the resurrection is somehow imperfect.”
An imperfect resurrection…
Considering this, I had to wonder: If the monster had lost the ability of rational thought, could I use Identify without it trying to defend itself? I decided it was worth a shot, so I used my Identify skill to check out the giant scorpion’s stats.

The Shield of God
Zodiac Scorpion, lv ???
Vitality: 9.3E (+9)
Strength: 9.3E (+9)
Magic: 5.5E (+9)
Spirit: 9.9E (+9)
Agility: 5.2E (+9)
Skills: ???

Identify unveiled the holy beast’s stats, but its level and skills remained obfuscated. Perhaps that was a quality unique to holy beasts, but whatever the case, the monster’s stats alone were incredible. Its Magic and Agility were a whole other level above anything I’d ever encountered in the Domain of E, and those were its lowest stats. The others were even higher.
Suffice to say, the holy beast had stats far beyond my own. However, stats became more difficult to control in the Domain of E. If you couldn’t control them, you couldn’t use them, and in worst-case scenarios, that power devoured your very heart and soul, transforming you into a monster.

If it was incapable of thought, this Zodiac Scorpion probably couldn't harness all the power of its stats. I'd witnessed this firsthand in my battle with the goblin shaman, who had turned unsuspecting humans into ogres. Ogres were made by forcing humans into the Domain of E, and Soul Decay robbed them of both their humanity and their sentience, which limited their effectiveness. Ibelieved that, in its current state, the Zodiac Scorpion would be hobbled in a similar fashion.

"Even if it can't use all of its stats," said Greed, anticipating my thoughts, "you still can't take it lightly. That's a holy beast you're facing off against. Look at Eris. She's trying to seem calm, but she's terrified. She's as scared of that monster as she is of Libra."

"Eris…"

Greed had noticed the same hesitation that I had.

"She seems fine now, but you better pray her past trauma doesn't afflict her when you need her most."

"Why would you say that now, of all times?"

Greed laughed. "Yeah, yeah. Sorry, whatever."

But Greed had a habit of correctly predicting this kind of thing, and I had a bad feeling about the battle ahead. I tried to put my qualms out of my mind as I relayed the holy beast's stats to Eris and Roxy. Then, to ease my nerves, I confirmed each of our roles.

"Roxy, you clear out any darkness that get too close to me and Eris," I said.

"Understood."

"Eris, you'll keep the holy beast occupied at mid-range."

"Roger! Close-up battles aren't my thing, so I'll keep you and Roxy buffed from a distance."

"With you two playing support, I'll take the holy beast head-on."

This left tactical decisions in Eris's hands, as she would be positioned between Roxy and I, and thus able to see the entire scope of battle. I would have my hands full with the holy beast, and Roxy would be just as busy dealing with the darkness. Then again, Eris had lived so long that she had more battle experience than the two of us combined, making her the most suited for the role.

As far as our weaknesses, there was only Eris's trauma, which Greed had mentioned. Because I didn't know what it was, I had no idea what might set it off. Worse, it wasn't something we could easily ask Eris about either. She nursed a deep wound in her heart that hadn't healed in many, many years. I couldn't simply ask her to reopen that wound to satisfy my curiosity. After all, if she could've talked about it with ease, it wouldn't have been traumatic in the first place.

"Let's get started. If we don't get after it now, it's only going to get farther away."

Eris aimed her gun and fired a shot, marking the start of battle. The bullet that blasted from her gunblade was imbued with enough magic to bore through and slay any lower-level monster in the Domain of E. Despite this, it

bounced harmlessly off the carapace of the scorpion. The beast's armor wasn't merely hard; it was on another level.
The monster reacted instinctively to the attack, turning and charging directly at us, sand pluming into the air with every movement. I readied myself to face it.
"You've been relying on my help up until now, but this battle will be a true test for you. As my wielder, it's up to you to bring the very best out of me!"
"I'll do whatever it takes, Greed."
"Oh? And what does that mean?"
"It means we're going all out on this thing."
With a burst of speed, I left Roxy and Eris behind to meet the Zodiac Scorpion at the front line. From behind, Eris fired a buff shot, which hit and cocooned me in light so silver it rivaled the moon. It was a Phalanx Bullet, a buff that boosted defense, severely lowering the damage of the next three enemy attacks. It required five levels of charge, however, which meant that Eris had spent some time before the battle preparing.
"Thanks!" I shouted back at Eris. Then I said to Greed, "Let's go!"
I leaped away from the attacking pincers and dove toward the underside of the holy beast, using the momentum of my leap to launch a powerful first assault.
"This thing isn't just tough!" I shouted. "It's like there's an invisible wall surrounding it. My blade can't get through."
"That would be its Divine Providence. Well, what now, Fate?"
Greed seemed to relish this moment as I stood before an enemy unlike any I had ever faced. The answer to his question was dead simple: I would fight. I unleashed my Gluttony to my half-starved state. A dull pain raced through my body along with a rising hunger. Even though I was used to it now, it was not unlike devouring my own soul. Laine told me that if I kept doing it, then in the not-so-distant future, I would become something inhuman. Whatever the consequences, I couldn't stop here. Not yet. I'd learned something from Aaron when we dueled to bid our farewells. The battles of the past had forged me into who I was. They had brought me closer to the adventurers I admired, all the way back to the time when my father was my hero.
"Like an adventurer, and like a Glutton," I said, "we'll eat this beast alive."

Chapter 14:
Flaming Swords and Holy Beasts

IF I RELIED on Greed's abilities alone, I couldn't so much as scratch the holy beast. So, I turned to the Fireball spell, but rather than casting it directly, I imbued the black sword in my hand. As I did, the blade blazed with a reddish-black flame.

"This is how you're going to get the party started?" asked Greed.

"I haven't just been polishing my swordsmanship. I've been working on controlling my magic too."

"Hmph. Have to admit, you've gotten better at it."

Of course, I hadn't just sat around doing nothing while we searched for clues to Myne's whereabouts. Gluttony gave me access to magical skills, ones I hadn't been born with. I therefore lacked innate control, and I'd really struggled to use them. Until now, I had only channeled them through Greed's black bow, depending on his support to make the most of the magical spells I had acquired.

However, after enduring Myne and Eris's training in Galia, I'd found a new goal. In that barren, desolate land suffocated with the stench of death, I'd mastered the ability to use the black bow without relying on Greed to aim for me, and as I grew more confident, I'd become ravenous with the desire to master my own magical spells in the same way.

The most important factor for controlling magic was one's mind and the ability to clearly picture the desired effect. It was an ability I could hone while in the spiritual plane. Thus, each night as I slept in the real world, Luna and Greed watched over me as I practiced in the pure-white expanse of the spiritual plane.

Through constant training, I had developed the ability to infuse magical attributes into the black sword. For this battle, I mimicked Miria's flamberge by using the Fireball spell. Even though I imitated her technique, it was in fact far more powerful than Miria's flaming sword.

"Let's get to it," said Greed.

"I'm ready."

I dove under the holy beast as I looked for another opportunity to strike. From behind, the darkness crawled toward me, but I paid them no mind. None of them could hurt me because I was in the Domain of E, and I trusted Roxy to take care of them.

"Fay!" she cried as her sword cut down the darkness around her.

"Thank you!" I called, my eyes still focused on the movements of the holy beast.

I believed in Roxy and knew she would manage the situation so that I could focus on the beast. Then there was Eris. The high-pitched rat-a-tat of

gunfire rang out across the desert as several bullets flew toward the scorpion.
“Fate, I’ll open an opportunity for you to attack!” Eris shouted.
“I’m counting on it!”
“I won’t let you down.”
Eris’s bullets dealt no damage against the monster’s Divine Providence, but they *did* draw its attention, and with my fiery sword in hand, I closed in to make the most of this opening. But that wasn’t the only way Eris played support. She fired a volley of shots at the beast’s legs. Knowing that direct attacks were worthless, she instead sent clouds of sand flying up into the air. This pulled away the sand beneath the beast, forcing it to struggle to keep its footing. If there was a golden opportunity, it was now. As long as the holy beast fought to stay upright, I could attack from any direction without fear of a counter.
“Nice work, Eris!”
“Get in there and cut it down!”
I moved to strike. I made sure that I didn’t sink into the sand as I prepared to put everything I had into my blade. But even as the holy beast struggled to remain standing, its eyes focused on me. A shiver flew down my spine, and in the next instant, the scorpion’s tail appeared overhead. The stinger plunged toward me with blistering speed, intent on impaling. However, I didn’t bother trying to evade it, instead continuing forward. I still had the effects of the Phalanx Bullet buff protecting me.
I held the black sword low when the holy beast’s tail crashed directly into me. The shockwave seemed to compress the very air as a sound like breaking glass echoed across the night. I was unscathed, but the scorpion’s tail was sent flying backward. In that instant, Eris’s buff proved its worth. It was good enough to resist an attack from an enemy this powerful and still take two more hits.
I focused on a direct attack, raising my voice into a martial shout as I closed in.
“Do it, Fate!” shouted Greed.
The holy beast’s stinger flew back at once, then again, finally eliminating Eris’s buff and leaving me vulnerable to further attacks. I wouldn’t get a chance like this so easily, but I was quicker than the scorpion. I sent the black sword flying toward the holy beast’s underside.
“Grrr…”
I grunted as I felt my blade once again repelled by the monster’s Divine Providence.
“What’s the matter, Fate?” asked Greed. “Is that really the best you’ve got? More, I say! More!”
But I was one step ahead. If this attack didn’t get through the monster’s Divine Providence, then I would increase the flame. I used Undivided Mind, a skill I had absorbed from the undead archdemon, a monstrous fragment of Shin possessing Rafale Vlerick. The skill gave me a pang of nostalgia, linked

as it was to my memories of those events. But this wasn't the time to dwell. The skill boosted my technical and magical skills by five times for a set period of time.
I had enough trouble controlling my Domain of E stats as they were, and the Undivided Mind skill made this even harder. I didn't use the skill anywhere near the kingdom because I feared what might happen. However, here in the middle of the desert with Roxy and Eris by my side, I could unleash everything I had without any such risk.
"Nothing but desert as far as the eye can see," said Greed, reading my thoughts. "So you can finally unleash the skill in all its glory!"
"I can already feel the surge in my magical abilities."
"Don't expect to be able to control it. It's too much for you right now. Just focus on unleashing it. All of it."
Greed was right. The rush I felt was beyond my ability to control. It was a power unlike anything I had ever experienced. The fire running along the black sword's blade turned an impossible shade of bright yellow. I'd never seen a fire like it. This was a flame that could not exist in nature, glowing a color that could only be seen through magic. I stabbed it right into the beast's Divine Providence.
This… It's working!
I felt some resistance at first, but then the black sword began to gradually overpower the scorpion's defenses. However, as I lost myself in destroying the scorpion's shield, I heard Roxy cry out.
"Fate! Behind you!"
I felt a sudden, terrible premonition, but by the time I realized it, the scorpion's tail had already snuck up on me. Without Eris's buff as protection, the tail's stinger would impale me with ease. In the next instant, several gunshots rang out.
"Hurry, Fate! I'll keep the tail clear while you destroy its Divine Providence! Go!"
"Eris!"
With Eris's suppressive fire, I returned my focus to wielding Greed. I knew that Roxy would in turn cover Eris by keeping the darkness off her. The sounds of her sword syncopated with Eris's gunfire. They did everything they could to back me up, so now it was up to me not to let them down.
"Greed, you ready?" I asked.
"Who do you think you're talking to?"
"In that case, I don't care what kind of 'providence' this is. Let's cut it down!"
Greed and I roared in unison as I poured all my power into my blade.
The blade pushed in faster as huge flames poured from it. The wall of light around the holy beast began to dissipate. When my blade at last came to a stop, the monster's defenses had all but vanished.
"Keep at it!" said Greed. "We're not done yet, are we?"
"We're just getting started."

Greed was talking about Undivided Mind, and he was right. We still had time before the buff faded. It didn’t only enhance magical skills, but technical skills too. In other words, it enhanced my tech-arts. The skill to use now was obvious. Still in my low stance, I leaped into the Sharp Edge tech-art.

Sharp Edge was a swift double-slice attack. First, I sliced upward, launching the holy beast’s huge red body flying into the air. Then, with Greed still alight with bright yellow flames, I brought the blade down in a devastating hard slash.

The scorpion came crashing back down into the desert sand, the impact sending shockwaves around it like an earthquake.
“Did you kill it?”
“You always act like you wouldn’t know right away. Quit it already.”
Greed’s words were meant to encourage me. But I couldn’t believe the strength of the holy beast’s exoskeleton. The black sword had cut through every enemy I encountered until now, but against the scorpion it did no better than leave a mere scratch.
“We’ve barely dented that thing’s armor,” I said.
“But no dents in my blade either, and you know what that means.”
“Yeah, yeah. You want to tell me I’m still not strong enough, right?”
“You read my mind. But at least you’re warmed up now. This place brings back memories, doesn’t it?”
It sure did. This was the desert where I’d first started training to control my Gluttonous urges. Back then, I’d intentionally starved and kept myself on the edge of hunger, only picking at the wandering sandmen like eating the crumbs off a plate. It had been excruciating, and each monster had hurt as much as a single drop of water for a desert-parched throat, but I grew used to it. I endured it until it was nothing at all. I had no intention of going back to those days, but it *was* time to feel that hunger again.
I took a deep breath and brought forth half of my Gluttonous hunger.
“Gah!”
A pain arced through my head like a thunderclap. Focusing on my stats, I felt instinctively that I had better control of them, even as I struggled with this strange sensation. Once I entered my half-starved state, my stats were under my control. The sudden strange headache subsided, and I was ready to go.
I watched the holy beast as it crawled out of the sand. The Sharp Edge attack had sent it deep into the dunes, but it climbed out with such ease that it was as if nothing had happened. The monster snapped its two claws in my direction, a threat. As it did so, it also lifted its tail, aiming its stinger directly at me.
The holy beast was different now. I felt a pressure emanating from it, telling me that it was in attack mode. Perhaps the change had come from breaking its Divine Providence, but I sensed that wasn’t the only reason. As soon as I unleashed the power of my Gluttony, I’d noticed a change in the way the scorpion moved. It brought to mind how Eris had become inexplicably nervous when she first heard me utter the words “holy beast.”
Eris bore a Skill of Mortal Sin, just like me. If there was some link between the holy beasts and our skills, then perhaps the monster standing in front of me had some kind of past linked to my particular power. But I could worry about that after I felled it. I tightened my grip on the still-flaming sword and settled into a battle-ready stance.

Chapter 15:
The Terror of the Beast

ALL OF MY STRIKES LANDED. I still felt like the holy beast wasn't in complete control of its stats. There was no rhyme or reason to the way it moved. Every response to my attacks was instinctual and reactive. It was unable to read or predict my movements. And if the beast's movements were simple and basic, it was all the easier for me. Even if Greed's blade only scratched the scorpion's outer armor, as long as I could focus on one point and keep attacking, eventually I would break through. At the very least, I wanted to lop off one of the monster's pincers before Undivided Mind wore off.
"Round two, Greed!" I shouted.
"Be careful you don't get caught in those pincers—or you'll be cut in half!"
I had already realized this. It was one sword against two pincers. Even if I was able to fight off one claw, the other could still destroy me. Not to mention that I still had to be wary of the holy beast's ever deadly tail. All in all, it was less like a one-on-one battle and more like one-on-three. Nevertheless, I trusted Eris, and I was counting on her support to handle the tail while I fought the rest. I raised the flaming black sword over my head and prepared to strike, setting my sights on the right pincer. I dodged out of the way as an attack came from the left and brought Greed down in a mighty swing. It would take time to expand on the tiny scratch, but I could feel each attack making an impact. At the same time, Eris fired ceaseless salvos at the holy beast's tail, keeping it from launching a clear attack.
This is good! Just need to keep up this tempo! I knew that getting overconfident was dangerous, but the tide was turning in our favor. I could entrust the flow of the battle to Eris's judgment from the mid-range position. Knowing she was there for support lessened the burden on my shoulders, and I finally felt like I understood why adventurers favored fighting in groups.
Eris's support role went well beyond just her attacks. This time, a bullet wrapped in blue magical energy hit me, and in the next instant, all trace of my form vanished.
So this is the Vanishing Bullet?
This was the perfect buff to use against an enemy that fought purely on instinct. Realizing that I had vanished without a trace, the monster suddenly stopped swinging its pincers. I wouldn't let this chance slip from my grasp. The holy beast's stinger also hovered, swinging from left to right as it searched for a now invisible target. At its hesitation, Eris switched her target to the left pincer.
Nice. Now I can focus completely on the right.
While Eris supported my ability to attack, Roxy helped Eris by handling any darkness that tried to close in on her. Perhaps it was just my imagination,

but Roxy's movements seemed sharper and smoother than before. I wondered if she had earned enough spheres from the fallen darkness to level up.
The fight was going completely to plan. Undivided Mind was about to fade, so I put everything I had into a combo attack on the right pincer.
Cra…crack!
The sound of shattering swept across the desert, and for a moment, the right pincer sunk into the desert sands. It had swung wildly in search of me as soon as I'd gone invisible, but now the pincer was rendered useless.
"There's not a moment to spare, Fate!" said Greed. "Cut that pincer off before it heals!"
"Way ahead of you!"
It was just like Greed to tell me what I already knew. Really, he just didn't trust me to make the right decisions without him. If I managed to lop off that claw, perhaps I'd earn a little of that trust at last.
Because the holy beast was still unsteady on its feet, it was easy to target the pincer. If I could land a strike that carved into the beast's flesh, I was certain I could cut straight through. I raised the black sword high and, with all the strength I could muster, I brought it down on the joint connecting the pincer to the scorpion's arm.
When Greed met the monster's armor, I felt a tremendous shock. The force of it launched me soaring past Eris, all the way back to Roxy's position. As she moved to catch me, Roxy cried out, "Fay!"
The force was stronger than I realized, and Roxy groaned as she braced against the impact.
"Thanks, Roxy," I said. "Are you okay?"
"I'll be fine. Are you hurt?"
"Thanks to you, no problems."
Roxy was relieved to see me ready for another round. I looked out at the holy beast in the distance. A black pattern of some kind was beginning to appear on its scarlet carapace. It reminded me of the tattoo on my father's face.
"What…is that?" I muttered.
"Fay! Look! The darkness, they're converging?!"
The countless darkness that Roxy had left for dead suddenly swarmed toward the holy beast. We had no idea what was happening, or what *would* happen, so we simply stood in place watching, dumbfounded.
However, Eris seemed to comprehend. "This… This is bad! The damn thing… How is it doing this unconsciously? Fate! Roxy! We need to kill all of those darkness. Don't go near the holy beast!"
"What's going on?" I called out as Roxy and I proceeded to mow down all the darkness we encountered on our way to Eris. I ignored the metallic droning voice informing me of my rising stats. "Eris—*what's going on*?"
"The holy beast is trying to devour the darkness."
"What? Is it like the Gluttony skill, then?"

“No, it’s different. They’re just food to that monster.”
“So…”
We fought and killed every darkness we could reach, but it wasn’t enough. More and more of them emerged from the desert sands. The holy beast had seemingly drawn them all to this place even before we arrived .
Even though the darkness weren’t in the Domain of E, we were facing several hundred of them. Over time, they’d start to agitate my Gluttony. As expected, I felt it rumbling even as I tried to keep it under control. I could almost hear Luna, protecting my soul as she cried out for me to stop.
The darkness piled onto the holy beast, melting into it.
“It’s like the monster is simply absorbing them,” said Roxy.
When the flood of darkness finally stopped, the monster was completely healed. On top of that, it now exuded an even more fearsome aura than before. The black pattern covering its red outer shell was now clearer and more defined, and a halo of divine light floated above the Zodiac Scorpion’s gigantic body. Looking upon that radiance felt almost like staring into the face of a god.
“You probably realize that this…is pretty bad.” Eris laughed ruefully. Her face grew pallid as she withstood the overwhelming pressure of the transformed holy beast. She had put on a façade of battle-ready confidence, but even before the fight, something hadn’t sat right with her.
I caught her before she collapsed. It was clear now that she could no longer fight.
“It’s her trauma resurfacing,” said Greed, his voice grave. “Whatever she went through with Libra, holy beasts are a part of it. Given how hard it is for her, it’s amazing she fought for as long as she did.”
“But without someone to make tactical decisions…”
“Without her, it’s over. Eris was the one controlling the flow of battle and forcing openings. We have to retreat for now.”
“Retreat?”
Even if we wanted to, where would we go? Now that the holy beast had absorbed all of the darkness, it looked primed to hunt us to the ends of the earth. Its eyes focused squarely on us, and they burned with determination. With that in mind, falling back to LeChoix was completely out of the question. Staying in the desert would mean running in circles while we prayed that Eris made a miraculous recovery.
I watched the holy beast, waiting for it to move while I considered my options. I sensed Roxy’s gaze on me, so I turned to her. “What’s wrong?”
“No, it’s just…I’m sorry. If only I were stronger, I…”
I smiled and shook my head. “Roxy, you did everything we asked of you. I won’t demand any more than that.”
“But…”
“We need to get as much distance from that monster as we can, and we need to establish a better position for our next assault. Now let’s go!”
I hefted Eris onto my back and checked behind me once more.

Huh?!
The holy beast was gone. I hadn't felt it move in the slightest, so I'd assumed it had stayed right where it was.
Greed was the first to notice where it had gone. *"Fate! Beneath you!"*
"What?!"
A giant pincer shot silently out of the sand below. I was taken off guard, never having imagined that it could move so smoothly that it wouldn't cause the slightest tremor. I couldn't respond in time. I couldn't avoid the attack. I pushed Eris and Roxy out of the way as the pincer moved in to chop me into bloody chunks, then leaped up into the air, hitting the pincer with the black sword as I twisted to evade its attack. But I couldn't get out of the way entirely, and the errant claw tore a gouge out of my side. Fortunately, my vital organs were spared, meaning my flesh began knitting itself together within seconds thanks to my Health Regen and Health Regen Boost skills. However, the pincer waiting for me as I landed wasn't going to grant me the precious seconds of reprieve I needed.
"Fay!" Roxy cried as she moved in to offer support.
"Stay back!" I snapped.
With her stats where they were, Roxy didn't stand a chance against a monster in the Domain of E. She was just as aware of that, but it was in her nature to take reckless risks if she believed that she might help. That was why I had to speak forcefully. I could apologize later, so long as we made it out of this alive.
As the pincer closed in, I realized that I wouldn't heal in time to survive a second attack. My only hope was to counter the pincer head-on. I could barely stay on my feet, but I gripped the black sword tight in hand and readied myself.
"Huh?"
The pincer never found its mark. Someone had come between us. They easily blocked the holy beast's pincer with their black spear. As I took in the silhouette before me, I realized it was a person I had long looked up to.
"Dad?!"
"You simply refuse to change, don't you?" he said. "I told you not to do this, but you did it anyway. I'll tell you right now—you get that from your mother."
Dean Graphite knocked the pincer away and turned his head so I could see his profile. His eyes met mine as a sardonic grin spread across his face.
"Can't do anything by yourself, can you?" he said. "But if you can still fight, then follow me."
I said nothing.
"Well, what are you going to do, Fate?" my father asked.
There was something nearly daring in his tone, and his choice of words took me back years and years. Back to forgotten memories of being a competitive, fiery child. He had always asked me that question in just that way, and it always lit a fire inside of me. That was why I wanted to be like

my father; he was the impetus for my youthful memories of running around swinging tree branches like they were swords, pretending to be an adventurer.

I was no longer the boy who had looked up to that man. Fighting as an adventurer to get to where I now stood had changed me. I didn't know the reasons for my father's actions, and for all I knew, he was my enemy. But at least for now, I wanted to believe in him…like I had when I was young.

"I'm in," I said.

I stood next to my father and brought Greed up into a fighting stance. My father smiled, satisfied. In front of us, the Zodiac Scorpion climbed up from the sand, eyeing my father with something like surprise.

Chapter 16:
Dean and Fate

"THAT'S MY BOY." My father seemed heartened by my response and put his hand out to ruffle my hair.
"I'm not a kid anymore," I said, dodging out of the way. I need him to know that I didn't like his attitude.
My father only laughed. "If you want to show me that you're all grown up, I'd like to see you take down that holy beast by yourself."
"Grr…Dad!" I said, unable to hide my anger at his condescension.
In the five years since his death, I'd struggled and crawled and fought desperately. He might have come back to life, but he knew nothing of what I'd suffered in that time. Yet he could still read the feelings in my heart as though they were on my sleeve.
"Hey, don't pull that face at me," he said. "We've got one hell of a fight ahead of us, and we'll have to work together to beat that monster."
"I'm stronger than you think," I replied.
"Well, you've got high stats, that's for sure. You got them all from your Gluttony? That skill, it's not what you think it is."
"Then…"
"It seems like an extremely potent skill because you can take stats and skills of every foe you kill. But those don't come without a price. Do you know the ultimate purpose of the Skills of Mortal Sin? Do you know who they're for?"
I had no answer for his questions. Nothing.
"I see," muttered my father, his voice quiet.
But we didn't have a chance to continue our leisurely chat. The holy beast turned its attention on us and charged.
I felt suddenly nervous to be fighting alongside my father for the first time, and I slipped up as the holy beast attacked. I was too slow to evade another slash from its pincers, and my freshly healed torso was about to get gouged again.
"Fate!"
My father drove his spear into the ground and a huge blast of razor-sharp ice engulfed the holy beast. The monster's claw was only inches from me when it froze.
"Are you all right?" my father asked. "Do you want to rest with the others?"
Frustrated, I grunted and leaped at the ice-covered holy beast with the black sword gripped tight in hand. As I neared, I unleashed Undivided Mind again and poured magical fire into Greed.
"Fire again?" the black sword asked. "How unimaginative."
"No," I said. "Not just fire."
"Don't go overboard with your Gluttony, Fate."

I was infusing the fireball spell with more power, strengthening it. The black sword began to glow brighter as the flames around its blade turned yellow. At the same time, a rivulet of blood flowed from my right eye. Ever since the battle with Rafale, unleashing my Gluttony had inevitably caused my eye to bleed and a malaise to spread throughout my body. This time I only wept blood, but there were no guarantees. I'd learned all this because of Laine, but now that she was traveling with my father, further analysis had not been forthcoming.

The flaming sword, imbued with ever greater power, swung down on the holy beast's pincer. I couldn't cut through it, but I was intent on at least leaving a mark. The fire spread from the blade and engulfed the beast. My blade alone wasn't enough, but with Undivided Mind and Gluttony empowering it, the magical power clearly had some effect, as the monster threw itself erratically from side to side in an attempt to extinguish those flames. When it realized that the flames still weren't going out, it tried to burrow into the sand.

"Not on my watch," said my father, spinning his black spear.

While I executed my attack, my father had been charging his own power. He pointed his spear at the monster and let loose a beam of icy light.

"Freeze."

Transparent ice instantly manifested, trapping the holy beast in place. The sheer amount was staggering—there was no way it could have been created through cooling the air alone. No, this ice had been summoned, and I had seen this before.

I knew it. It was ice that even the black sword Greed couldn't scratch.

The monster was immolated then frozen in an instant. The sudden change in temperature sent cracks running through its carapace.

"Wow, Fate! Amazing! Was that your plan all along?"

"Uh…yeah."

The sudden praise from the black sword caught me off guard, and I was unsure how to respond, so I simply took the compliment. More importantly, I felt like I had learned something valuable about combining elemental spells.

My father and I charged toward the holy beast for our next attack.

"Watch out for the tail, Fate," he warned.

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Don't aim for the extremities," he added. "It grows them back like a lizard with its tail."

It was the exact opposite of the strategy Eris, Roxy, and I had devised. Our plan had been to get rid of the tail and pincers before attacking the body, but in the end the holy beast had simply healed itself by absorbing the darkness. I realized then that my father knew a great deal indeed about the monster…

“And be very careful of the poison in the scorpion’s stinger. Even the smallest amount will kill you.” There was an edge of bitterness to his voice, as if he’d felt it firsthand.
“Got it. I’ll keep my eyes open.”
I thrust my flaming blade into the fractured outer shell of the holy beast and felt it give. The monster writhed from the attack but was held fast by the ice and couldn’t get away.
“It’s useless, Snow,” said my father. “Now I can finally pay you back.”
He sent magic flowing into his spear before driving it into the scorpion’s body. The sheer power of it obviously dwarfed my own, for the holy beast’s body warped and deformed, and the ice surrounding it shattered from the force. The monster’s tail and pincers tore into pieces, pulled apart by the exploding ice and the impact of the spear attack.
He’s so strong…
Even so, my father looked like he was holding back.
The holy beast, barely moving, bled indigo from a deep wound in its carapace. My father didn’t stop; he drew back his spear and plunged it into the scorpion’s side.
“Is that the best you’ve got, Snow?” he said.
The scorpion let out something like a roar as it writhed in the sand. For all intents and purposes, the beast had lost the will to fight. As I moved in to deliver another blow, something strange happened: the holy beast suddenly vanished.
“What the hell?”
I froze, stunned, but my father walked on calmly. He stopped before a young girl with red hair who had collapsed in the desert sand. She was covered in scars, and bleeding from several fresh wounds. I never could have imagined that the holy beast would be human—or at least, able to take a human form. My father took a few steps closer to the girl, then raised his spear up high.
“A body so young…You really have lost a lot of power,” he said under his breath. “Now to send you back to hell.”
He pointed his spear at the girl’s heart. He had every intention of killing her. His face remained stoic as he brought his spear down. But before he delivered the killing blow, I blocked the spear with my black sword.
“Fate, what are you doing?”
“Dad…”
The two weapons sparked as they ground against each other. I shook my head. The second I saw the girl’s face, there was just no way I could allow him to strike her down.
“I can’t kill her while she’s crying, and I can’t stand idly by while someone else does.”
Tears fell from the girl’s closed eyes. They weren’t the tears of someone begging to be spared. She had woken confused and disoriented, then gone

on a rampage as a result. Through the madness of battle, she had lost sight of her own senses and self. Those were the kind of tears she wept.
My father glowered at me for a time before shaking his head and pulling back his spear.
“Do what you will,” he spat, exasperated. But he turned back to me once more as he walked away. “That part of you, it comes from your mother too. The girl you saved is called Snow. Just like me, she returned because of the Door to Distant Lands. After fighting with her, I’d say she’s lost more than half her strength. That could be why she went on a rampage. But know this, Fate: holy beasts are your enemy. Do not forget.”
He didn’t wait for my reply. Instead, he went to where Roxy tended Eris, said a few words to her, and vanished into the desert. I kneeled down next to the girl he called Snow. It was like the chill winds had cooled her body after the exhausting battle. And now that the battle with the holy beast was over, the darkness had gone also. There was nothing left but the sound of sifting sand carried on the wind.
As my breathing calmed, Roxy came over to me, carrying Eris. “Fay, are you okay?”
“Still kicking. How’s Eris?”
“She’s stable, but…she needs time.”
“I see.”
Roxy looked from me to the red-haired girl. I knew she was full of questions, so I jumped to explain. “That holy beast we were fighting just now, it’s this girl. She’s called Snow. I don’t know how, but my father recognizes her.”
“I saw it happen from afar. I can’t believe it has a human form. And the body of a young girl, no less…”
“She looks young, but we can’t know how old she really is. Myne looks young too, and she’s been around for thousands of years.”
I asked Roxy to head back to LeChoix with Eris. I knew we couldn’t take Snow back just yet, even if she was unconscious. There was every chance she’d transform back into a holy beast and destroy the whole estate when she awoke.
“I’ll wait here until daybreak—until Snow wakes up,” I said. “If she listens to reason, and if she’s on our side, then I’ll bring her back with me.”
“And…if she’s not on our side?”
“Well…I have a feeling I can make things work.”
I hadn’t felt any ill will from Snow in our battle. If anything, the holy beast operated on survival instinct alone. Having seen the tears she wept earlier, I just couldn’t imagine her being as dangerous as Roxy suspected. Regardless, the moment I’d chosen to protect this girl from my father, it was settled: she was now my responsibility.
“Your curiosity is only going to get you killed!” shouted Greed. “She’s a holy beast! A holy beast!”
“And whatever happens now is my responsibility,” I replied.
“You know what that means, right?”

“I do…and only too well.”
My father knew that I was serious; that was why he hadn’t pushed back. If worse came to worst, I would do what needed to be done. There was simply no room for excuses when dealing with something with the power of a holy beast.
As I stood there, alone with the girl named Snow, I realized that I had forgotten to ask Roxy what my father had to say to her. I hadn’t thought to ask because I’d assumed she’d tell me of her own volition, but…she hadn’t said a thing.

Chapter 17:
Snow the Oblivious

THE GIRL'S HAIR was a fiery shade of red. As time passed, her gruesome wounds healed on their own, almost as if she had the Health Regen skill. I remembered that when we fought, Identify had shown me her stats but not her skills, but maybe things were different when she was in human form. It was worth a shot, so I used the skill.
"Hah…"
"What's the sigh for?" asked Greed.
"It's the same as Myne. The Identify skill doesn't work at all."
This wasn't like the trick Aaron had taught me to interrupt Identify, which involved releasing a magical flare to shock the person trying to use it. With Myne, and now with Snow, the skill simply showed me nothing. I knew she didn't have Conceal either, because that skill only hid stats, and as far as I knew, you couldn't use it while you were unconscious.
"This is hopeless…"
"Some creatures just defy the Identify skill, you know?"
"Don't call her a creature! How would you feel if I called you an inorganic object?"
Greed laughed. "It's not often you take the time to be so considerate of little old Greed! But let me tell you something. We call Snow and her like the holy beastfolk. They and the bearers of Skills of Mortal Sin have a past that goes way back. To the holy beastfolk, we were little more than livestock. But when that livestock fought back, it had them shaking in their boots."
"So, the one who bore Gluttony before me fought them too?"
"That he did. He was the one who started it all."
There was a certain joy to Greed's tone, as if he were recalling a very old but pleasing memory.
Up in the sky, at a point somewhere east of the moon, a particular star caught my eye. It was the star called Laplace. It seemed to be glowing brighter lately. I'd first noticed it when Greed and I journeyed toward the great canyon of Galia. I remembered the sudden rumblings of my Gluttony as I watched it, and even now, I felt the skill squirming within me. It seemed the star had some kind of influence on my power.
I returned my attention to Greed and his tale of battle with the holy beastfolk. "So what happened? What was the war with the holy beasts like?"
Whenever I looked at the star Laplace, I wondered if perhaps I could better understand how the world had ended up this way. But I also just wanted to know what had *happened*.
"It was just like this," he said.
"What? What does that mean?" I knew he was talking about Snow, but that wasn't enough of a clue for me.

“Oh, dear, not this again,” the black sword groused.
“Stop being so damn patronizing.”
“Oh? I don’t suppose you’re still hung up on the way your dad talked to you?”
“Not in the slightest!”
“For what it’s worth, the angrier you get, the more you prove my point.”
I glowered. What the hell?! I was trying to ask a serious question about the past, and this is what I get?!
“Come on, Fate, no need to pout. The war ended in a draw. There were losses on both sides. But that war was the foundation for the stability of our present day.”
“So why did you say it was just like our fight with Snow?”
“After that fight, the holy beastfolk splintered into factions. There was vicious infighting. You see, we weren’t the ones who killed Snow originally. Nonetheless, she came back because of the power of the Door to Distant Lands. That seems likely, given how your battle went.”
How did he expect me to grasp all of that from a simple “Just like this”?!
In any case, if bearers of Skills of Mortal Sin had been like livestock for the holy beastfolk, then it sounded like they’d fought to free themselves from oppression. But it also seemed like a battle that had never really ended. That only added to the enigma of Snow. She had, for some reason, broken away from her own people. How had that happened? I hoped she didn’t harbor any ill will for those like me. I didn’t want to have to fight when she finally woke up. All the same, I kept Greed tightly in hand, ready to meet violence at a moment’s notice.
Is she friend? Or foe?
Snow slowly opened her eyes and stared up at the night sky as she lay on her back. When she finally opened her mouth to speak, she said, “Where… am I?”
I didn’t sense any aggression from her. Her eyes looked glassy and unfocused, like she was still dreaming. Nevertheless, I knew her question was directed at me.
“You’re on the outskirts of the estate currently governed by the holy knight LeChoix,” I said. “Presently, we’re in the Desert of Extinction.”
“The Desert of Extinction… And you?”
“I’m Fate Barbatos. Your name is Snow, isn’t it?”
“Snow?” The girl blinked uncomprehendingly at the sound of her name.

Huh?! What's going on?! I thought.
She looked perplexed. "I'm Snow? Hmmm…"
"You… You don't know your own name?"
"No. I-I can't remember anything."
"And you don't remember anything else? Nothing at all?"
"Nope! I don't remember a thing!" The bright, innocent smile on her face made for a perfect contrast to my confusion.
All right, so what now?
I decided to try my Telepathy skill first. Snow had no idea what I was trying to do, so she didn't resist. As expected, it was the same as the Identify skill; it just didn't work. I decided to consult with Greed.
"Well, what do you think?" I asked.
"From what I can tell, she's not lying to you. But just to be sure, ask her some questions while she's touching me. I'll be able to tell from her heartbeat whether she's lying or not."
"Okay."
Snow was completely obedient. She put a hand on Greed just like I asked and answered all my questions. When I conferred with Greed afterward, he confirmed that she wasn't lying.
"Her heart didn't skip a beat."
"If she's not lying, then…she's got amnesia?"
"Seems like it. That would also explain why she was so erratic and violent earlier."
It reminded me of what my father had said about an imperfect resurrection. It was possible that the memory loss had left her unable to control her own powers, sending her into a frenzy. But amnesia? Now there was really no way to judge if she was an ally, an enemy, trustworthy, or dangerous.
"What do you want to do? You going to leave her?" asked Greed.
"I can't. I'll take her back with us. We need to make sure she doesn't lose it again."
"I knew you'd say that. Then let's head back! My blade requires cleaning and oiling!"
"You are *way* more fussy about cleanliness than I ever would have expected."
"The finest of blades require the finest of service!"
It was funny to think that when I'd found the black sword, he had been literally caked in dirt and grime.
I took Snow in my arms, and she didn't resist. She was covered in blood and sand from battle, and I figured it would be wise to ask LeChoix to prepare a bath for her when we got back to the manor.
We walked the quiet sands of the desert back to the old Lanchester estate. Snow didn't speak a word and merely stared out at the sand blowing on the wind. Though her wounds had healed, it appeared she still didn't have the energy to move much. After all, she'd been on the receiving end of the

battering my father and I gave her while she was the Zodiac Scorpion. Even considering what she'd done in the first place, I felt a touch guilty now.
Finally, the town came into view, and someone was waiting at the gates. It was Roxy.
"I'm so glad to see the two of you safe," she said. "You've talked to her?"
"A bit, yeah."
Roxy looked at Snow and gave her a big smile. Then she turned to me with a slightly awkward expression. "To be honest, I was waiting here in case another battle broke out."
"I'm sorry I had to put you through that. But as you can see, she's not dangerous. At least, not yet."
"Not yet?"
I told Roxy about Snow's amnesia. "I'm still thinking about how to handle the situation, but for the time being we should keep her with us."
"Well, I trust you and Greed," said Roxy. "But would you mind introducing us properly?"
"Oh, sure. Snow, this is my friend. Her name's Roxy."
"It's very nice to meet you," said Roxy. "I know it must be hard for you to not have your memories, but if you need anything, just say the word, okay?"
This was the Roxy I knew. She loved kids. Whether they liked her back was another thing entirely, but all the same, when she saw a kid in trouble, she felt inspired to act. In the past, we'd found a young child lost in Seifort's streets, and Roxy had taken the plight of the boy so seriously that her grim, determined face had brought the poor child to tears.
Actually… she was wearing that same expression as she looked at Snow. I had a pretty good idea of how Snow was going to react.
"Fate, help me! She's scary!"
Just as I expected. And now that she'd done that, I knew exactly how Roxy would respond too.
"What?! Me? Scary?" Her astonishment gave way to disappointment. I understood how she felt. She survived an exhausting battle, and this was the thanks she got. "Why? Why are kids scared of me?" Roxy bemoaned.
"Don't ask me."
"That's not fair, Fate. Kids love you. You make friends with them straight away. Not fair at all."
Her eyes bored into me with dissatisfaction. Did she really not know that the look on her face right now only made her scarier? In any case, if we were going to be traveling together, Roxy and Snow would need to learn to be around each other.
"Snow, I need you to listen to me now," I said.
"What is it?"
"Roxy isn't scary. She might seem scary, but she's super kind. I promise."
"You promise?" Snow clung to me, still furtive, but at least she seemed to listen. She timidly looked over at Roxy. "No, she's too scary!" Snow cried.
"Fate…" Roxy sighed.

“What?! What did I do?!”
It was the second time I’d tried to fix things and the second time I failed. Ouch. I knew it wasn’t good to raise somebody’s hopes only to dash them. It made a heavy heart even heavier. On top of that, Snow clung to me even tighter, like she was trying to hide from Roxy. It looked like it was going to be a long road before they became friends.
I felt Roxy’s silent chagrin haunting me as we walked. This whole thing had put me in an awkward position. I didn’t even want to think about what it would be like to introduce Snow to Memil. Or Eris, for that matter.
I suddenly felt incredibly anxious.

Chapter 18:
Debriefing

MEMIL AND LECHOIX awaited us back at the manor.
“Master, you did it!”
“I can’t thank you enough!” said LeChoix. “Finally, the residents of the estate can rest easy.”
They’d already heard about the battle from Roxy, but their curiosity was clearly piqued by the little girl clinging to me. Unable to hide her perplexity, Memil spoke first.
“Um… Is that girl you-know-what?”
“Yeah,” I said, “but this might not be the best place to talk about it. LeChoix, is there a room we can use for discretion’s sake?”
“Yes, of course. Right this way.”
LeChoix took us to a quiet common room of the manor.
“Come on, Snow, let’s go inside!” said Roxy, trying to earn the girl’s trust with a friendly attitude.
“No way! I don’t want to!”
Roxy sighed. “I’m a failure.”
Roxy’s attempts were fruitless; they only seemed to push Snow further away. It was a vicious cycle, but Roxy wasn’t about to give up—I was well aware of that. However, even though Snow rebuffed all her attempts, Roxy’s expression lightened, and she seemed a little happier. LeChoix and Memil were left unsure of how to act around the two of them, let alone how to talk to Snow.
As soon as we entered the common room and before we even sat down, Memil spoke. “This little girl is the holy beast that rampaged through the desert?”
“I’ll tell you everything, but take a seat first, yeah?”
I sat facing LeChoix, with Snow on my lap. Roxy sat next to me, with Memil opposite Roxy.
“She was so big before, and now she’s so small. And that red hair of hers is just adorable.”
“It seems this is not her usual form,” I said. “To make matters more difficult, she’s suffering from amnesia. When she woke up, she couldn’t even remember her own name.”
“I see. So, she returned because of the Door to Distant Lands?”
“That seems most likely. Greed said she’s one of the holy beastfolk. She’s existed for a long, long time.”
“The holy beastfolk… Hmm… Give her here for a second so I can see her up close.”
“Memil, stop! She doesn’t like people getting pushy with her!”

Memil was walking straight into the same trap as Roxy. It was like watching someone put their hand into a hornet's nest. Or so I thought. Snow was happy to let Memil do whatever she wanted.
"Oh? I think she likes me?" said Memil. "She does! Who's a good girl?"
"What?" I stammered in disbelief.
But another voice cried out that was even more aghast than mine. Roxy's, of course. I couldn't work it out. Why was Snow so much friendlier with Memil? As if to show off, Memil lifted Snow up and down into the air. They were already having a great time together. Roxy watched as she sank into her chair, the color draining from her face, despondent. I wasn't sure if she'd make it.
LeChoix had observed the whole interaction quietly but now raised her voice. "Everybody please be quiet for a moment! I have to ask something important! What is that *thing* poking out of the bottom of Snow's clothes?"
"Hm?!"
LeChoix pointed at Snow's lower body. From the bottom of her clothes, we saw something poking out… Something very much like a tail. All of us grew quiet with curiosity as we took a closer look.
"It's a scorpion's tail!!" we exclaimed.
Whatever it was, it certainly wasn't human. Humans didn't grow *tails*. So Greed hadn't just been running his mouth; the holy beastfolk were essentially their own species.
Snow fidgeted under the attention, embarrassed. "Nobody else has one, so I was trying to hide it," she stammered.
Losing her memories had made her uncertain about the world and people around her. When she'd noticed that I didn't have a tail, she hadn't been sure what to do regarding her own.
Memil, with daredevil bravery, put her hand out to touch the tail. "It looks rigid, but it's surprisingly soft to the touch! And it's warm!"
"Ooh…" groaned Snow.
"Stop it Memil! Stop now!" I protested.
Snow looked like a little girl, but she was still in the Domain of E. Even a temper tantrum would bring the whole manor crumbling down around her. I instructed Memil to sit down and behave herself.
"How disappointing, I was having so much fun," Memil complained.
"Your thoughtlessness is the only disappointing thing here. Are you ready for her to destroy this whole estate all because you couldn't resist touching her tail?"
"Fine, I'll be good. Nobody wants that."
I relaxed a little. Snow looked a bit relieved too. She didn't seem to like Memil paying so much attention to her tail. Just when I thought things were settling down, I felt Roxy staring at us, her eyes hungry for something.
"Wh-what's wrong, Roxy?"
"What's wrong? That's what I want to know! Why is Memil acceptable, but…I'm not?"

It was a good question. Snow wouldn't even let Roxy touch her. Even as Roxy spoke, Snow ran behind me to hide. It was a completely different story with Memil. She'd even let Memil touch her tail when she was clearly nervous about it. All of which pointed to the fact that…
"Is it possible that she hates you, my lady?"
LeChoix spoke before I could say a thing. She looked so soft and gentle, but her words were seriously cutting. Roxy hadn't expected it, not from LeChoix of all people, and her shoulders slumped like she'd taken a punch in the guts.
"I hope this doesn't sound weird coming from me," said Memil, "but kids don't like me. They really don't. So if Snow has taken a liking to me, I think it has something to do with Fate. For example, perhaps she caught his scent on me?"
"What does that mean? I don't understand." Roxy's eyebrows knotted as she frowned.
Memil put her hands on her waist and pushed her chest out proudly. "It's because we sleep together and spend so much time in the same bed. I must have picked up his scent."
"Huh?!" Roxy's eyes brimmed with tears as she tapped me on the shoulder, demanding an explanation.
Wait, wait, wait, perhaps she's not technically wrong, but she's certainly giving you the wrong idea about things!
"Roxy, calm down!" I protested. "Don't forget she only spends any time in my bed because she literally sucks my blood, gets tired, and falls asleep on the spot. That's what she's talking about! She doesn't mean anything else! I swear!"
"Fine…"
The conversation was getting heated, but despite that, Snow had curled up for a nap on my lap. Her breathing was gentle and relaxed, and she occasionally moved just a fraction to get more comfortable. It seemed that her body still needed time to heal after the battle we'd put her through, so it was all I could do just to make her feel comfortable. I ran a hand through her hair and addressed Roxy and the others.
"It's not my scent—it's my blood, I think. I don't know for sure, but perhaps she's drawn to Memil because Memil takes my blood regularly."
"Your blood? Interesting… That makes sense," said Roxy. "After all, I touch you enough that surely some of your scent is on me too."
"Well, I'm glad we settled that, then," I said.
I was relieved too. As much as Roxy wanted Snow to like her, I didn't think she'd go so far as to suggest that she should drink my blood too. At least, that's what I told myself as I watched her eyeing my carotid artery.
Anyway, now that we'd taken care of the rampaging Zodiac Scorpion, the Lanchester estate was safe once more. We wanted to be absolutely certain, so we decided to check the desert soon to make sure the darkness had truly gone. I needed to satisfy the ravening of my Gluttony for one, but the

monsters had stats and skills I wanted too. It was true that I had trouble controlling my stats, but I also knew that the more I had, the better. Skills, on the other hand, were the opposite—the more I had, the more I had to keep track of and learn to master.

I did have to make sure to keep myself from getting too comfortable with my Gluttony, but as long as I did that, the Skill of Mortal Sin only made me stronger. And now that my father had shown me the vast difference in our power levels, I needed more power.

Seeing that we'd just finished one battle and were about to jump into another, LeChoix suggested we take a bath at the manor before heading out to hunt for any remaining darkness.

"Your bodies must be exhausted from the battle with the scorpion, so why not let them relax a little? Then we'll head out and look for the darkness. I'll come along too, of course. They seem like monsters I can handle."

"Great idea! Count me in!" said Memil. "Actually, I already got permission from Her Majesty!"

"Somebody came prepared…"

"Expect nothing less from a maid of the Barbatos family! We work day and night to support our masters! I'm sure you must be exhausted, my lady, so feel free to relax and heal up here at the manor."

Memil was gung-ho and full of vim, and I realized she hadn't at all liked being left behind for the previous battle. Sure, she'd seen us off with a smile, but she had desperately wanted to join us. I didn't like how pushy she was about it, but she *was* really trying her best as a maid, so I thought she'd earned the right to blow off some steam. But Roxy didn't love her attitude either.

"No, no, I can still fight," she said. "And besides, I've fought the darkness myself, which means I can give rookies like you pointers on how to best defeat them. I'll be very detailed."

"Why thank you, my lady. I can't wait."

Roxy laughed nefariously. "Neither can I."

A black aura seemed to surround the two of them as LeChoix and I watched, unsure of how to defuse the situation. I felt LeChoix's troubled gaze wander in my direction, but if she expected me to stick my hands in the fire by trying to stop this, she had to be kidding herself. Rather, there was no better time than now for me to run off and get cleaned up.

"I, uh…I think I'll go take that bath now," I said. "Would you mind showing me the way, LeChoix?"

"Oh, of course. Follow me."

As I stood up, I noticed Snow's eyes open the moment I said the word "bath."

"Bath! A bath! I'm taking one too!"

"Okay, okay," I said.

"Hurry! Faster!"

LeChoix and I bolted out of the room. We didn't want the manor destroyed because Snow got over excited about her bath! As we hurriedly left, Roxy and Memil chased after us.
"Fay!"
"Master!"
There was no time to turn around for them—because Snow's power grew with her excitement. Moreover, as she was in the Domain of E, I was the only one who could manage her. We dashed past flustered servants and maids, who had probably never seen anyone hurry for the baths so fast before. But thanks to the new lord of the estate, we reached the bathing halls intact.
"Here we are," said LeChoix. "Actually, since arriving here, the baths are the only place I've had fixed and renovated. Lanchester had some…unique tastes…"
Roxy and Memil nodded in agreement. I got the sense that Lanchester had been less than popular among the female holy knights, and that the bedrooms and dining room would soon get full renovations too.
But whatever—it was time to take a bath!

Chapter 19:
The Majestic Baths of Lanchester

THE BATHS were fortunately separated by gender. I breathed a sigh of relief. Sharing a bath with Roxy or any of the other girls was a frightening prospect. I'd recently swapped bodies with Roxy, and that had been nerve-wracking enough. I'd done everything in my power to make sure I didn't peep on her naked body because I maintained the soul of a gentleman.

I took off my clothes and looked out at the bath, this time with Greed in hand. Usually I left him elsewhere, but I knew that if I didn't clean him, he'd complain all night, so I'd decided to give him a good scrubbing.

"Whoa…this place is enormous," I whispered sotto voce.

I couldn't help but be impressed. We had only just repaired the baths at Barbatos Manor, but this bath was at least four times larger. You could have easily fit forty people at once. Even if they were all splashing around, they wouldn't get in each other's way.

"Ah, finally, a bath fit for a sword of my caliber," said Greed. "I will never again settle for anything less."

Greed relished the luxury and grandeur of it all. LeChoix said she'd made some renovations to the bath, but was it possible that she'd actually made the place bigger? She seemed polite and reserved on the surface, but perhaps she was the type of person to go as far as it took for the things that mattered to her.

"Well, it's nothing if not the picture of extravagance," I said. "This place is so big that I can't even see the opposite wall."

"This bumpkin perspective of yours has got to go!" said Greed. "You're a holy knight now, and you're in one of the esteemed families to boot."

"This level of excess just doesn't suit me. People like me, we can't get used to this kind of opulence."

"Well, you can think what you want, but why not make the most of it, now that you've got a whole bath to yourself?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

I rinsed all the desert grit from my body before entering the bath. The problem with fighting in the desert was you couldn't stop the sand from getting into your clothes and everywhere else.

There was something about a bath this big that excited the child inside of me, and as I was all by myself, I decided to dive in. It was a way bigger splash than I'd even expected.

"What are you, a child?!" shouted Greed.

"Loosen up. It's just us in here. Let's have some fun!"

Greed muttered more complaints as familiar voices floated over the partition.

"Jumping into the baths is strictly prohibited, Fay!" Roxy yelled.

“It’s unbecoming of the head of the Barbatos family to engage in such childish activity, Master!” Memil added.
“Please show a little consideration for the manor baths!” LeChoix said.
I stared at the partition as I realized it separated the men’s section from the women’s, and that there was enough space along the top to talk to the neighboring bath.
“I’ll be on my best behavior next time, I promise,” I said. Then I thought of Snow, who until now had been intent on staying by my side. “How’s Snow? Is she being good?”
“She’s being very quiet,” said Memil.
Snow liked Memil, so I was relieved to hear that. It would have been a disaster if she’d gone on a rampage.
“Snow, come here for a second,” said Memil. “Did you know that Master is on the other side of that wall?”
“Really? He’s really on the other side?”
“He is. He’s taking a bath just like us.”
It was nice to hear them chatting so casually, but no sooner had I started to relax when Snow yelled, “If Fate’s on that side, I’m going to that side!”
“Wait, what?!”
Screams erupted on the other side of the baths, and suddenly an explosion tore a massive hole through the partition. Naturally, Snow was at the epicenter of it. With a beatific grin, she threw herself at me.
“Now we’re together again!” she shouted.
“Snow…what have you done?!”
I stared at the giant hole she had created, and through it saw three young ladies bathing—I gulped—in the nude.
Their screams rang out a second time. I turned away as quickly as I could, but it was too late—the image of their bodies had seared itself into my mind. I felt my own body overheating, and it wasn’t because of the steaming water.

“I’m sorry!” I said.
“You didn’t do anything wrong, Fay,” said Roxy. “Snow broke the wall.”
But even if it had been completely out of my control, I had still seen them naked. Roxy had forgiven me, but that didn’t account for the others.
“I can’t believe it!” cried Memil. “My master, he’s seen me naked.”
“Hey!” I said. “I hear that sardonic smile in your voice! You’re messing with me!”
“Harrumph! I would never! But if our relationship has progressed this far, then I suppose we have no choice but to bathe together.”
“What?! No choice? You could just stay angry at me like a normal person!”
But Memil wasn’t joking. From the corner of my eye, I noticed her crawling through the hole in the dividing wall. I tried to escape, but Snow kept a tight grip on me, and I couldn’t move. Why was she using her Domain of E stats in the bath?!
“I won’t let you go, Fate!” she said.
“This is *so* not the time for this, Snow!”
I had nowhere to run. Memil entered the men’s bath like a predator stalking her prey, ready to pounce.
“What happened to that bashfulness from earlier, Memil?!”
“It’s an unfortunate truth that I cannot undo what happened or change the past. But I can ensure you experience a similar humiliation!”
“It’s not at all about that! You just want to bully me! You love it!”
“I do!” Memil’s reply was vivacious, crackling with energy. Nothing brought more joy to Memil than watching me squirm. This was especially true regarding her Blood Lust.
With Snow firmly holding me in place, I had no defenses until Roxy came to my rescue. “Memil! Stop that!”
“Not now that I’ve come this far. I call dibs!”
“Memil! Wait!”
Even Roxy couldn’t do anything. As I glanced once more at the opening in the wall, I realized that in pursuit of Memil, Roxy had *also* entered the men’s bath! Things had gone from bad to worse in a heartbeat. On top of it all, LeChoix followed behind Roxy, tears welling in her eyes. She couldn’t understand why any of this was happening, so she simply trailed along in the hopes that she might find a way to put a stop to it.
“Oh no, oh no, oh no, everyone, please!” she cried. “You can’t do this here! Not in the baths!”
“What are you all doing here?! It’s the men’s bath!”
But my voice was drowned out by the cacophony of girls splashing through.
“Master!” cried Memil.
“I told you to wait right there!” shouted Roxy.
“Oh no, oh no, oh no,” chanted LeChoix.
“Wait, all of you!” I shouted. “Stop!”
But there was no stopping any of them as they dove for me. A geyser of water plumed up from the steamy bath. It was a mess. Where was that

peaceful bath I had hoped for? I'd also lost track of Greed in all that chaos, meaning he was stranded somewhere at the bottom of the bath. I could practically hear his oaths and curses even without my Telepathy. Even so, he was probably having more fun than any of us, so I put him out of my mind.
My senses swam from all the heat, so I stumbled back and tried to exit the bath, only to hear a familiar voice booming from above me.
"How could all of you do this to me? You leave me to sleep and then go off to have a pool party?"
"Eris…" I whispered. Not now! Not while I'm so weak—not while I'm so helpless! The last thing I need is the Lust skill making everything crazier. Anything but that!
Memil was only ever half-serious, but Eris didn't play games. She was dangerous!
"Eris," I said cautiously, "I'm about to faint from the heat and excitement. I think the others are too. Will you help us out?"
"I will…"
"Help us?" I pleaded.
"Join you!"
Eris was so excited that she threw aside the towel wrapped around her body. I couldn't believe I'd even bothered asking for her help! But I was so lightheaded that I couldn't even focus on her naked form, my thoughts instead focused on the realization that Eris had purposefully entered the men's bath. She had planned to ambush me right from the very start.
"Arghhh!" I shouted in frustration.
"Look at you!" said Eris, "All raring and ready to party!"
"Ready to party? Read the room!"
But Eris was so caught up in her own narrative that nothing could change it now. I knew that she'd probably built up a lot of stress from not being able to fight to the end of the battle, but now she was planning to release it all on me?! I turned to Roxy and LeChoix for support, but they simply floated on the bath water in a stupor from all the heat. Snow, for her part, still clung tight.
"Snow, you have to help me," I said.
"Fate, I'm real dizzy all of a sudden," she said.
"Of course you are! It's hot in here!"
It was madness. I had no idea what was happening. Snow let go of me and gently floated away in a daze, the heat having gone to her head.
"Looks like the holy beast is on our side, now. So, my mortal enemy is suddenly my teammate?"
"Calm down, Eris…"
"Don't worry, it's fine! I'm just going to take a soak in the bath and then I'll drag all your stupefied bodies out of it. But before that…"

Eris's voice grew suddenly distant. All the heat had gone to my head and I felt like I was going to collapse too. All I could do was trust that Eris would help us. All I could do was believe in her.

***

I felt something cool on my forehead. It was so nice that I felt like I wanted to stay in that moment, sleeping forever. For a time, I drifted in that feeling as my senses slowly returned to me. A warm hand rubbed my cheek, making for a pleasant contrast. When I opened my eyes, I found myself lying in one of the manor's guest bedrooms.
"You're finally awake. The battle with the Zodiac Scorpion really took it out of you, didn't it?"
"Eris… You really brought me here?"
Eris's cheeks puffed up in anger. "Why is that so surprising? I pulled all of you out of the bath, then called the maids to clothe and carry you to your rooms."
"Thank you. I-I thought you were going to leave us."
Eris laughed. "Even I know how to behave when the situation calls for it. I wasn't about to leave the girls to drown, you know."
"I'm sorry if I sounded like I didn't trust you."
Eris grinned cheekily. "Oh? But I didn't say that I didn't do anything to *you*, did I?"
"What?!"
She was a demon! Even now, with the moonlight streaming in through the windows, a bewitching, beguiling aura floated around her.
"What…did you do, Eris?"
I took a deep breath and waited for her answer. But she was in no hurry, so she teased it out, little by little.
"After the maids took the girls out of the bath, I waved away other help, so it was just me with your naked body."
"And then?"
"Well, you must realize there was nobody around to get you dressed."
What?! She'd just told me that she waved away the help! Yet now she acted like she had exhausted all her options!
"So, I pulled your body out of the bathwater and I gently, softly toweled you dry from head to toe, and I eased your body into your clothes with great care. Then I carried you to your room and placed you on the bed. I've been watching you sleep ever since."
"Why am I cringing with the knowledge that you had complete freedom to do whatever you wanted?"
"Oh, really, you don't have to thank me, Fate. I enjoyed every second."
"Drop the act, Eris," I said finally. "I know you didn't do anything more. You like to talk a big game, but we've traveled together for quite a while now. You're not the type to take advantage of people."

I'd felt it the night she told me about her past as we looked out at the nightscape of Tetra. Eris liked to put on a carefree attitude, but she was still burdened with old wounds on her heart, even after all these long years. But I had also been relieved when she opened up to me; the problems she faced were similar to my own, and it made me want to help her overcome them. I wanted to understand her better, and I understood that although she liked to play jokes on me, she wanted to help me in turn.
"You're too kind," she said, and though I couldn't tell by the light of the moon, I wondered if she was blushing. "But I *am* glad. I'm glad you won against the holy beast, even though I only made things harder for you in the end. I'm sorry, Fate."
"Don't worry about it. That's the whole point of a party; we have each other's backs."
"Thank you, Fate. I didn't tell you earlier, but…" Eris paused for a moment. I had a feeling I knew what she would say next.
"Libra is one of the holy beastfolk, isn't he?" I said. "And when you faced the Scorpion before, it reawakened those painful memories."
"Yes, exactly that. When I saw her in battle, it brought all that pain of the past flooding back. But there's no enmity between me and Snow. I'd never met her before today. It seems that not all the holy beasts are the same."
"I have to admit, I'm relieved to hear that."
I had worried that Eris and Snow had some kind of shared history. If they did, traveling together would have been a headache, so I was glad that those fears were misplaced.
"Fate, when you saw your father in that battle, surely you saw for yourself. Your father, he's…"
"Sorry, Eris," I cut her off. "I intend to ask him that myself. Face to face."
It was something I had to ask directly, as a son to his father. Eris seemed to understand where I was coming from, and she didn't push the issue.
"Your life is so much more complicated than you can even know," she finally said, enunciating each word with slow deliberation.
I didn't answer. There was nothing to say. I had been destined to receive the Gluttony skill even before I was born, and it had started…something. I had a feeling it had to do with my mother. My father had explained to me that she died of an illness, but perhaps that had been a lie he told me for my sake. Whatever the case, I would find out. I would find him, and I would hear everything.

Chapter 20:
A Town Ruined

TALKING WITH ERIS seemed to wake me right up. I wouldn't get back to sleep anytime soon, so I headed for the desert. I was breaking my promise to the others; we'd agreed to hunt the remaining darkness together. But though I felt a pang of guilt, the effects of battle still lingered within me. I was desperate to go on a rampage, and I couldn't sit back and wait. Eris was no different; she was frustrated and disappointed in herself for what had happened during the battle with the Zodiac Scorpion.

Long story short, that's how Eris and I ended up standing in the middle of the desert together.

"Let's give it a shot then!" she said.

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"It's literally the fastest way to get what we want!"

My face scrunched up nervously. The reason was simple: Eris wanted to use her Lust skill to draw all the darkness to us. The problem, however, was that she planned to go all out. This meant that we'd draw not only the darkness, but any other nearby monsters and crowned beasts. We were guaranteed to become completely surrounded, as they'd charge at us from all directions.

"Get ready, Fate. Think of all those incoming monsters as a buffet for your Gluttony."

"I need to prepare myself, so give me a second." I took a deep breath to calm my nerves. Before I could even exhale, I saw sandstorms rising on the horizon. "Eris, I said to give me a second."

"I did! So, let's get to it. I'll support you with buffs the whole way!"

Eris was hungry for action, and she lured a huge host of monsters to satisfy her. They closed in fast, surrounding us on all sides. There were so many that I was reminded of Galia's stampedes. Seeing it all unfold got Greed excited too.

"Can you feel your blood boiling, Fate? How long has it been since we've feasted on such a spread?"

"Easy for you to be so carefree. You're not doing the fighting."

Greed gave a familiar cackle. "But the one fighting needs a weapon, no? In any case, be careful not to overindulge."

"Yeah, I know."

Eris landed the first attacks, slaying several monsters from a distance to charge her gunblade. "One Vanishing Bullet coming right up. They won't see you coming!"

As soon as the bullet hit me, I took off running. The monsters could no longer sense me. I cut a bloody swathe through the darkness and the other

monsters. The metallic voice I'd grown so used to droned on ceaselessly, constantly updating me on my increasing stats.
This battle was the perfect chance to try out my new Gale Blade. And with my stats in the Domain of E, it packed significantly more magical energy. When a darkness cast Gale Blade, it was fairly small, but my version of the skill sliced through the air like a tornado. It sucked in any monsters that had the misfortune of coming too close and spat them out as an indistinct puree of limbs and gore.
"Now this I like!" I said.
"Have your fun, but keep an eye on your Gluttony, yeah?"
"You worry too much. None of these monsters are in the Domain of E, so I'll be fine."
"Hmph, if you say so."
Even though I'd just finished battling the Zodiac Scorpion, during which I'd unleashed my Gluttony *and* forced it back under my control, I felt good. Usually after going through that kind of ordeal, I needed Memil's Blood Lust to neutralize my Gluttonous urges. It was refreshing not to feel that way this time. I wondered if it was because Luna was feeding me more power from within. If she was, I owed her my thanks when I next saw her.
The battle was going exactly as we wanted, and I was enjoying myself more and more. At the same time, a part of me felt like a bully because of the sheer difference in stats. On the other hand, these monsters would only attack any humans who ventured too deep into the desert; nothing good could come of leaving them alone.
I leaped into the middle of a pack of darkness and felt another buff slam into me from Eris's gunblade. I assumed it was the Phalanx Bullet this time, not that it mattered. None of the monsters were in the Domain of E, so none of their attacks could even leave a scratch, rendering the buff redundant. I couldn't help but wonder why Eris would use that buff on me as I chopped down the surrounding darkness.
"Eh? What the hell?!" I exclaimed.
I wasn't just chopping down the surrounding darkness anymore; I was annihilating several monsters that lurked *behind* them too.
"My power and attack range have gone up!"
Eris tittered. "You can thank the Raging Bullet for that one."
I turned to find Eris standing atop a hill of darkness corpses.
"The more I use Envy's support skills, the more my mastery rises, which opens up new bullet types."
"If that's the case, then feel free to go wild."
"If you insist," she laughed. "Let it be known, I'm way more supportive than I look!"
It was just like her to state the obvious, but I understood that she was trying to rebuild her ego after being triggered at the battle with the Zodiac Scorpion.

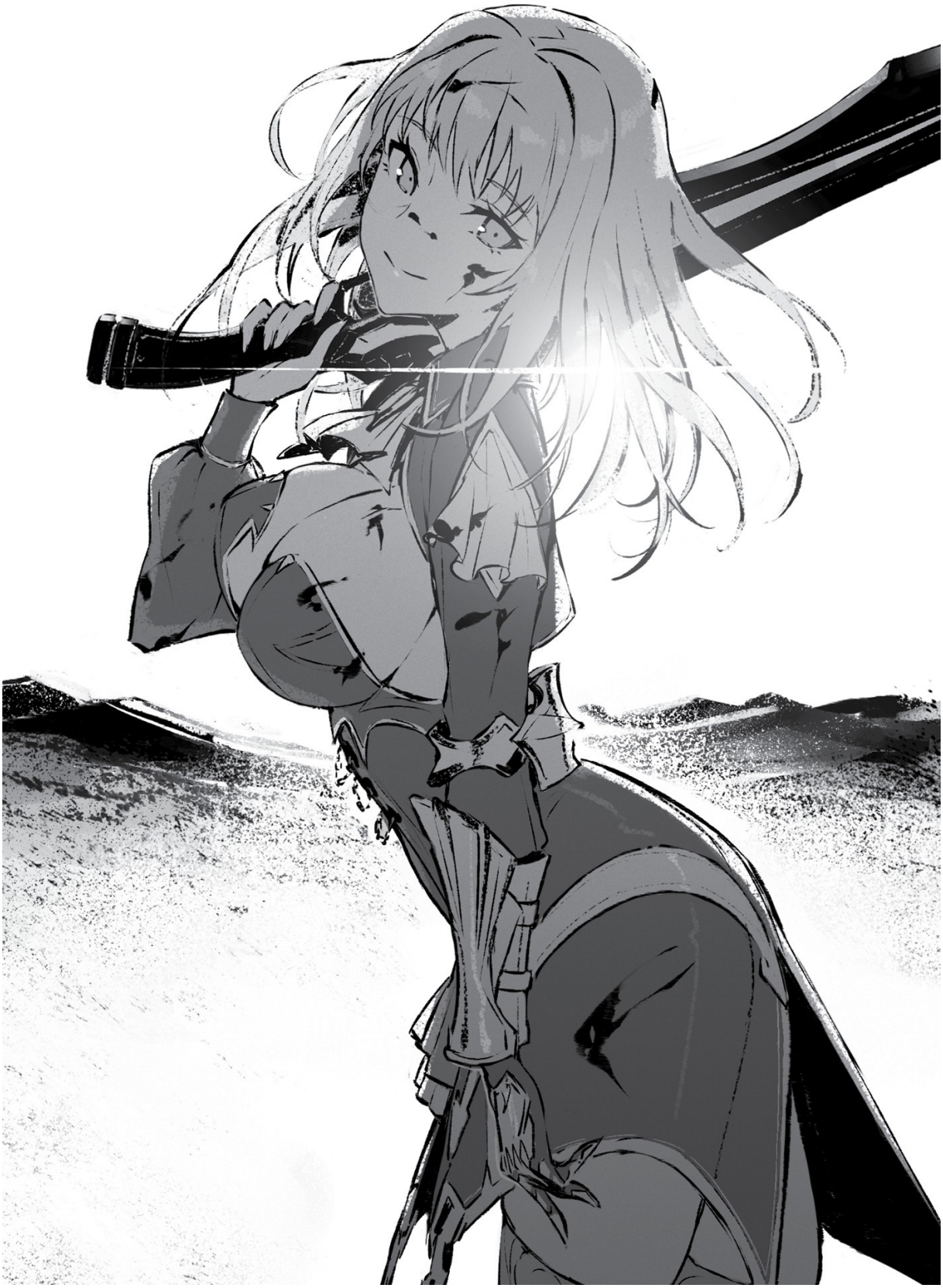
The buff of the Raging Bullet had incredible strategic potential. I wondered what it would be like combined with Undivided Mind, or if I unleashed the full power of my Gluttony at the same time. Just imagining the results made me giddy. That said, there was no reason to go so over the top in this kind of battle. The Raging Bullet buff had already made me way overpowered. I was cutting through the darkness like they were nothing.

The battle raged to a close when there were no more monsters left to respond to Eris's Lust skill. The desert would be free from such menaces for quite some time. Moreover, other than the monsters Eris had killed, we didn't have to worry about the Door to Distant Lands bringing any of them back to life, because those souls were trapped in the prison of my Gluttony. The Door couldn't save them from the eternal suffering that awaited them there. Greed had said as much, and I felt it to be true.

Eris and I were drenched in darkness grime and monster blood. In the latter half of the battle, Eris had wanted to polish her blade work, so she'd got up close and personal with the monsters. We were the dictionary definition of a bloody mess.

"It's so peaceful now, isn't it?"

The hint of a smile grew on Eris's face as the sun crested the horizon behind her.



It was a beautiful sight, but I couldn't help but wonder how much of Eris's charm was involved in making it seem that way. There was something tantalizing about her smile, even as she was covered in blood and grime. Something fleeting as well, as if it might vanish in the next moment. Like Myne, Eris had lived for a nearly inconceivable span of time. I was like a newborn by comparison, but even then, I was glad to see a new side of Eris.
"Well, that's a job well done, if I do say so myself! Shall we head back to the manor, Fate?" Eris wrapped me in a hug, smearing gore on me in the process.
"Ew! You're getting blood in my eyes!"
"Don't act like you don't like it!"
She was back to her old self again, and I knew she'd be a handful. Still, I much preferred this to the Eris who had sent my heart fluttering with a smile just moments ago.
"Oh?" said Eris, seemingly hearing my thoughts. "Your heart rate has gone up. I wonder why?"
"Th-that's because we literally just finished fighting!"
"Oh, really? Is that the excuse you intend to use for your rosy face too?"
"Uh…"
"Ohhhhhh, I know what's happening…"
I turned my face away, but Eris only leaned closer in. Her satisfied smirk bore into me. "I see, I see. Just as I thought."
"What is it this time?!"
My reaction only made her smile widen, so I let it go. The sand carried by the wind stuck to our bodies, and it was only a matter of time before we became sandmen ourselves. Before that could happen, I began the march back to the estate. Eris followed after me in high spirits.
"That's the first time we've ever fought together as a duo!" she said. "What a rush! I mean, we practically look like sandmen as a result, but on the bright side I've got some new bullets to play with!"
"Wait, so you learned more than just the Raging Bullet buff? What else did you pick up?"
"I'd hate to spoil the surprise, so you'll just have to wait and see!"
I wished she would just tell me, but I was content to let the matter go. I trusted Eris to use those new buffs when the time came. That was exactly what she had done during our battle against the Zodiac Scorpion, and again in the battle we had just won. There was no need for me to tell her to change; we were a party, and parties were founded on trust.
"Hey, Fate."
"Hm?"
"I'm going to get stronger. I promise. First, I have to get back to where I was at my peak, but eventually, I'm going to settle things once and for all."
She was talking about the holy beast, Libra. But it wasn't a burden she bore alone. My father was somehow wrapped up in his plans too. When I met Libra, he'd approached me like he would an ally or friend. But he had his

own reasons, even if our goal was the same: to stop the Door to Distant Lands from opening.
“When that time comes, I’ll be here if you need me,” I promised.
“Thank you, Fate.”
By the time we returned to the Lanchester gates, we were completely caked in sand. Even the gatekeepers mistook us for sandmen when they first saw us. We thought it was hysterical but decided against telling Roxy and the others. Back in the manor, we headed straight for the baths.
“A bath would be a nice way to get refreshed and cleaned up, don’t you think?” said Eris.
“The women’s bath is that way.”
Eris laughed. “Oh, you didn’t know? Snow put a hole in the dividing wall, so it’s officially a mixed bath now.”
I suddenly felt very vulnerable to surprise attacks. At the same time, there was no way I could expect Roxy to ride on a motorcycle with me while I looked like this.
Before I knew it, Eris was dragging me toward the bath. “I’ll clean you up good and proper, don’t you worry!”
“Eris, stop!” I replied. “There’s no need to use your Domain of E stats here!”
“Deal with it. I’m serious about getting you cleaned up!”
“It’s a bath! It’s supposed to be relaxing!” I protested.
“All right! Here we go!”
I was dragged all over the baths, but I came out clean and refreshed in the end, so I had to settle for that.
-†-
Before we took off on our motorbikes, Roxy and Memil had some choice words for us. They were none too pleased that we’d gone out hunting without them.
“Fay, you’re always going behind my back and doing things in secret,” said Roxy.
“Not to mention the fact that you’d disappeared when we woke up! Do you know how worried we were?”
“I’m sorry, guys,” I said. “Really, I am.”
I tried to apologize in earnest, but Roxy and Memil only whispered between themselves. I had no idea what they were talking about. It was incredibly nerve-wracking, but Eris was all smiles. It was like she was watching a show that she wasn’t even part of. I was about to give her a piece of my mind when Roxy spoke.
“If you do something like this again, then we’re just going to have to put a collar on you, Fay!”
“Indeed! It’s the only way!” said Memil.
“Whoa, guys! I’m not a dog!”
I was sweating bullets when the girls burst out laughing and assured me they were just joking. I’d almost had a heart attack. I’d *felt* them staring at

my neck and totally believed they were serious. In the end, though, they were happy. Exterminating those monsters meant that the townsfolk were safe from future attacks, after all.
LeChoix couldn't have been more grateful that we'd taken care of the Zodiac Scorpion. She promised to make it up to us in the future. I told her not to worry about it, but she got so fired up that I wasn't sure if she actually heard me.
We rode the motorbikes south. My bike now carried three people, with Roxy sitting behind me and Snow in front. As long as Snow had me as a barrier, she was content. She remained cautious and wary around Roxy, much to Roxy's chagrin.
With Memil behind the handlebars of the other bike, we rode on until we spotted a line of caravans overloaded with baggage.
"Fay, what's going on over there?" asked Roxy.
"Unusual, isn't it?"
The caravans were heading north. Merchants usually traveled in groups of five to ten, but the caravans were easily double, perhaps triple, that number. We stopped the bike to ask one of the caravanners about it. With a haunted look, he told us where they'd come from.
"There's a barren stretch of land to the north. We used to live in an oasis that was located in the middle of it," he said. "But a young guy showed up in town and opened a massive pit in the ground."
The person whom the caravanner spoke of was unbelievably powerful. The hole he'd opened in the ground had completely dried up the oasis. With the only source of potable water gone, the land quickly reverted to a lifeless desert. The townsfolk had no choice but to pack all they could carry and head north in search of a new home.
"Eris, do you think LeChoix will have space for them in Lanchester?" I asked.
"It's their best bet," she replied, "and it's the closest habitable land from here. With the threat of monsters gone, trade will start up in Lanchester soon enough. That's definitely where they should go."
Eris took a piece of paper from her chest piece and quickly wrote a note on it. She passed it to the man, saying, "Give this to the young lady governing the Lanchester estate. She will grant you protection for a time."
"Thank you, holy knight. you are far too kind," the man said.
"Well, I'm actually…you know what? It's fine. You're welcome."
Eris understood that telling them her true identity would only make things more complicated, so she let the comment slide. She didn't want them to make a fuss, so she watched with the rest of us as the caravans rolled into the distance. When they were gone, talk turned to whether we should stop by the former oasis.
According to Greed and Eris, we still had time before the Door to Distant Lands was fully opened. Furthermore, Roxy and Memil were desperate to help any other people still trapped in the town. Finally, as soon as the

caravanner uttered the name of the person who had turned the oasis into a barren wasteland, we knew we had to go: Libra, Eris’s mortal enemy, and a holy beast like Snow.

When I heard of the oasis, I recalled a town I’d visited on my journey to Galia. This place had in fact been built above a terrible monster that lurked beneath it, but we’d ultimately had no choice but to leave it as it was. That monster was known as a City Eater.

Chapter 21:
To the Depths of the City Eater

AFTER WE PARTED WAYS with the caravans and continued on, we came to a stretch of verdant greenery. It was a strange sight to behold in the middle of a barren wasteland. When we crossed into it, a familiar sweet scent wafted through the air, similar to when I'd last visited, but there was one major difference.

"It's abandoned." Roxy gazed out from behind me at all the empty houses. "There's nobody left at all."

Now that the caravans had left for new homes, the lively place I had once visited had transformed into a ghost town that would soon be swallowed by the desert. Back then, the town had been covered in farms growing all sorts of produce, some of which was used to feed the thriving livestock. As we dismounted our bikes to take a closer look around, we found ourselves beholding at a very different sight.

The fields lay fallow and disordered from a rushed harvest. There wasn't a single animal in sight, and the fences that had once penned them in were now broken.

"This is horrible," I said. "It's nothing like I remember."

"Looks like everyone got out of here as quickly as they could."

"Sure seems like it…"

Eris and Memil stopped their own bike to join Roxy and I as we scanned the surroundings.

"I had no idea this town existed," said Eris. "But it was obviously built fairly recently. That said, looking at it now, I don't know if you could even call this place a town anymore."

"Were those caravans we met the last to leave?"

The buildings looked like they had been built quite recently, but we detected no signs of life in them. Being in that empty place brought with it an eerie, unnatural silence.

"Well, shall we have a look around for any stragglers and see if they can tell us anything?" asked Roxy.

"Good idea. Memil, will you help Roxy look around?" I asked.

"Understood."

As the two of them walked off into the town, I looked down at Snow, her hands clasped tightly to my leg. Her fear had only grown after we entered this place. At first, I thought she was just clinging like usual, but now I felt her trembling against me. Something was definitely bothering her, but I couldn't tell what it was from her expression. I hadn't told Roxy and Memil because I didn't want to worry them just yet, but Eris had noticed the change in Snow too.

"She's haunted, isn't she Fate?" Eris said.

“I suppose you know what it looks like.”
Eris replied with a wan smile. Even the mere mention of Libra had taken something out of her. Roxy and Memil saw it too, and it was why they didn’t mind doing reconnaissance for intel in our stead.
“You don’t have to do this, you know,” I said. “If you’re worried about seeing Libra, it’s okay to wait here.”
“I’ll be fine…I’m just worried about Snow.”
“It’s a fear that reaches beyond her amnesia.” It almost seemed like she felt it on an instinctual level.
“No matter how you look at it, she’s got some kind of past with him too. With Libra.”
“Even if she does…she still doesn’t remember what that past is.”
Snow stood frozen in place, clamped onto my leg. I put a hand through her hair and waited for her to calm down a little.
“You’re a good girl, Snow. A strong girl,” I said. “I’m going to go see Roxy and Memil. Do you want to come with me?”
“Okay. But there’s something scary up ahead. Be careful.”
“I will. Thanks, Snow.”
I took her hand and nodded. We had only just begun to walk toward Roxy when Memil called out to us.
“Master! We’ve found a few townspeople!”
“Where are they?”
“There’s a big manor down that way. It belongs to the family in charge of the town…well, the family that *was* in charge.”
“And there’s people there, huh? Let’s go.”
We followed Memil to the manor situated in the center of the town. On our way, I noticed several of the trees lining the main street were barren and dying. At first, I wondered if there was simply nobody left to take care of them, but on second glance, these trees were withering far too fast for that.
“Something bothering you, Fate?” asked Eris.
It didn’t seem worth mentioning, so I shook my head. “No, it’s nothing.” It was more important that we talk to people here than discuss the state of the local foliage.
“Master, Your Majesty, please hurry!” said Memil.
“On my way,” I called, pulling Snow along with me.
“Right behind you,” echoed Eris.
But when I laid eyes on what awaited us at the center of town, I was shocked.
“What happened here?” I asked.
“What’s wrong?”
“There used to be a lake. It was right here last time.” I pointed at the cracked and fractured landscape ahead. There wasn’t a single drop of water in sight. “This water… It was more than just water.”
Memil and Eris listened as I explained what I knew about the special properties of the water in this place—how drinking it had the power to heal

wounds and alleviate exhaustion, and how plants watered with it grew at an accelerated pace and made for bountiful harvests.
“I see, I see,” said Eris, nodding. “So when the water dried up, their livelihood dried up too.”
Roxy came out of the manor at that moment, so we put our conversation on hold.
“This way, everyone,” Roxy said. “Something’s happening to the people in the manor. It started very suddenly. I don’t know what to make of it.”
We entered the manor to a spacious reception area. According to Roxy, the manor belonged to a family of three, along with a full staff of servants. However, the servants had left soon after the drought began. Roxy explained this as we walked down a long corridor to a room in which a young man waited. He looked pale and sickly, like he was battling a disease of some kind.
“I’m Ted,” he said, introducing himself. “My parents are the town officials charged with its governance. Firstly, I must thank you all for coming here. I am humbled in the presence of holy knights. Unfortunately, we’re not doing so well, as you’ve likely noticed. I regret that I cannot treat you with the hospitality that your rank dictates, and for that you have my deepest apologies.”
“You have nothing to apologize for,” I said. “But I was hoping you could answer some questions for me. Where are your parents?”
“They collapsed just a short while ago, and now they sleep in their bedroom. I was fortunate to meet Roxy here just when they did, and I was grateful for her help.” Ted turned to look at Roxy, who smiled back, before continuing.
“My family and I, we grow weaker with every passing moment. I think it might be the land itself. I can’t tell if it’s because of the City Eater or because of that man, Libra. Either way, I have a bad feeling about it.”
Even as he spoke, Ted seemed to deteriorate . The mere act of talking caused him to sweat profusely. He needed to rest as soon as possible.
“Let’s get straight to the point,” I said. “The guy who came here, Libra. When did he arrive?”
“About a month ago. Then the water began to dry up. He told us there was something evil underneath the town. Said it was a monster and that we should leave as quickly as possible. None of us believed him at the time, so we drove him away.”
“So he left?”
“He did, but the water level of the lake kept dropping. The desert wastes soon started to encroach on the town. The water and the power within the lake were the reason we could live here at all, so people started to leave. By the time Libra came back, the condition of the lake was even worse.”
“I assume most of the townspeople had left by then?”
“Yes, they had. Except for me and my parents, there were perhaps only ten others.”

With the lake dried up, it was impossible to grow any more food. The town's water reserves dwindled until they were almost empty too. Ted could see the next question written across our worried faces, and he answered before I could speak.
"You're wondering why we'd choose to stay here given the circumstances, yes? Those who chose to remain were the founders of this town. We discovered it when we had nowhere else to go. In our exhaustion, this place was a joy unlike any other. We promised ourselves that we would never leave this paradise. Not ever…"
"Not even when it stops being a paradise?"
"Not even then. Whatever happens to this place, we will see it through to the end."
We could see that Ted intended to stay even if it meant enduring the weakness afflicting his body. I wanted to tell him that he should leave for his own sake, but Eris placed a hand on my shoulder.
"I know what you're thinking, Fate, but it's no use. He won't listen."
"But Eris…"
"You're right. I know you're right. But he won't budge. None of them will." She looked Ted straight in the eyes. "Right?"
There was no doubt in his gaze. His resolve remained unshaken. I sighed and glanced out the window. I was surprised to see the trees outside had changed color. It was as if the life was draining from them, the plants aging like mayflies.
"Look outside," I said.
We rushed out there to find great fractures had opened along the desiccated basin of the lakebed. Then the earth shook violently. Trees fell and buildings crumbled.
"This magic, it's…"
"It's like they're fighting deep beneath the earth."
I could feel it through my feet, a suddenly swelling pressure. I hadn't been able to feel Libra's presence in the town, but there was no doubting it now. The pressure and the magical energy were exactly the same as what I'd felt when I met Libra in Tetra. Snow froze in place, holding my hand, her face tense. Her eyes focused on the ground below.
"He's coming, Fate," she whispered.
"What?!" I whipped around to the others. "We have to get away from here! Now!"
"Fay?"
"Master?"
"Well, this should be interesting," said Eris.
A giant plant root burst from the ground, so thick it seemed to engulf the world behind it.
"Memil!" I shouted. "Look after Snow!"
"Understood!"
"Roxy, can you make sure we've got a way out of here?"

“I’m on it!”
Eris and I drew our weapons and cut down the root in front of us.
“Fate, this root’s the perfect size for pruning, don’t you think?” Greed said.
“Not the time, Greed!” I shouted. “Is this the City Eater?”
Roots burst from the ground all across the town. There were entirely too many to handle. As soon as I cut one down, several others sprouted in its place.
“Yeah, this is a City Eater all right,” said Greed. “But it’s still just a baby, so it’s on the smaller side. My guess is Libra’s doing something to it down there, and this is the result. Cutting all these down won’t be easy.”
“But why is—wait, what the hell?”
I watched as a root I’d cut down crawled along the ground, budding brand-new roots. The monster’s regeneration abilities were off the charts.
“How about a taste of this, then?” I yelled, imbuing Greed with the Fireball spell and slashing the root a second time. “Oh, come on! Seriously?!”
“Quite odd for a plant to be fire resistant, isn’t it?” said Eris.
“Isn’t it against the natural order of things for a tree to shrug off fire?”
Fortunately, the monster wasn’t in the Domain of E, which meant that Memil and Roxy could cut the roots down too. That said, we couldn’t take the monster lightly. Not only did it regenerate faster than we could cut it down, it could partition itself into independent parts from which to regrow. The more roots we fought, the worse things got for us.
“It’s not looking good,” I said. “Let’s make some space and head to the edge of town while we work out what to do next.”
“I don’t think it’s going to let us, Fate.”
Branches shot from the surrounding roots and latticed around us like a cage. The rank of the monster meant that I wouldn’t take any damage, but we were still outmatched and on the back foot. I didn’t know enough about the City Eater to identify its weak points, and Greed didn’t know how to stop it either.
“No choice but to fight,” I said, gripping the black sword and raising it overhead, ready to strike at the root crawling toward us.
“Fate, wait!” said Greed.
“Huh?”
“Something’s happening to it.”
At first, I didn’t know what Greed was talking about, but I started to notice that the roots were losing their aggression.
“They’re withering,” I said. Then, realizing what I was seeing: “No, not withering, they’re rotting. They’re dying.”
In just a few moments, the roots that had splayed out from underground crumbled like sandcastles after a tidal wave. Eris watched, terrified by the power on display. Her fear told me who we had to thank for this tide change.
As the remaining roots perished around us, that very person strolled out from between them, toward us.

Chapter 22:
The Power of Libra

"LIBRA!" I shouted.

Libra turned to look at me and replied with a crooked grin. He was completely unarmed, as if he had no desire to fight. However, the vast magical energy that surrounded him seemed almost gleefully eager for battle. This man was not to be underestimated.

"Why, hello there, Fate. Long time no see. Then again, I suppose it hasn't actually been that long, has it?"

"What did you do?"

"Exactly what it looks like. I exterminated the monster that lurked beneath the earth in this place. In order to keep casualties to a minimum, I gave everybody in town fair warning. It's the right thing to do in these situations."

"There are still people here though! And the monster wasn't going to cause any actual harm yet. It wasn't going
to act for hundreds of years. So why did you do this? Why now?"

"I can see that you don't understand my methods, but that's fine. Allow me to explain. Let's say we wait those hundred years for the monster to finally go on its rampage. Who would the townsfolk have been able to call for help then? Hm? Not to mention, the monster would nigh certainly have made it to the Domain of E by then."

The town lay beyond the kingdom's defined border, and it didn't belong to any holy knights, so there were no adventurers on standby anywhere near. The situation would only become harder and harder to handle the longer the monster was allowed to grow.

"You see?" continued Libra. "The only ones who can fell a beast like this are those who bear skills like yours…or people like me. But you need to look at the bigger picture. I'm a busy fellow, and my time is limited. I can't just sit idly by until the people here decide they finally need my help."

"So you chose to act now."

"I gave them all the time they needed to get to safety. The situation wasn't so urgent that I couldn't give them *that* much. I considered it before I decided to take action. Let me ask you, Fate: How would you have handled the monster? Hmm?"

Libra crushed a dead root under his foot as he walked toward us, but there was no feeling in the gesture. It was simply an obstacle in his path. It meant nothing to him.

"You don't have an answer, do you?" Libra said. "And it seems to me that you already knew of the monster here. Let me guess: you passed by the town, discovered the monster and understood its purpose, but because you couldn't do anything about it, you left. Does that sound right? Do you hear

what I’m saying, Fate? If you can’t solve the problem yourself, then don’t complain about the people who can.”
Libra strolled past me.
“Libra, wait,” said Eris.
“Oh, my…she finally speaks. I was beginning to think you were little more than a statue.”
Eris glared at Libra, her entire body trembling.
“Oh, and you’ve learned a new expression too,” he said. “How cute. Have you gotten a little stronger since we last met? How does it feel to play queens and castles? Does it make you feel important? Powerful?”
“I’m… I’m not the person you once knew. Not anymore!”
Eris pointed her blade at Libra, but he remained completely cool and composed.
“If you want to shoot, I’m right here. But I wonder, can you pull the trigger? With the Door to Distant Lands opening, surely you must know how utterly foolish it would be to make an enemy of me now. That is, you would…if you were still the person I once knew.”
Eris gritted her teeth, but she loosened her grip on the gunblade.
Libra laughed. “That’s a good girl. Meek, docile, obedient. Just like I remember.”
Libra then turned back to me, but he found someone standing between us.
“Why, hello there, Snow,” he said. “I never imagined you’d come back quite like…that.”
Snow had broken free from Memil and stood in front of me with arms outstretched. She was protecting me from Libra, and she growled at him angrily.
“Calm down, little one, no need to be mad,” said Libra. “My, my, if anybody was watching us, they’d think I was the villain here.”
“Leave us alone!” shouted Snow. “I hate you!”
“So much to say with so much passion, and yet no memories in that head of yours. But that’s neither here nor there. Very well. You know, I’d actually come here to meet Snow, but I think it’s best I leave her in your care for the time being.” Libra grinned wickedly and looked me in the eye. “Probably best to avoid wasting any more time here and get to Hausen as soon as you can, Fate.”
“I don’t need you reminding me,” I replied.
“Good boy. But no matter what happens, you *must* stop the Door from opening. It’s imperative. Do you understand?”
“I do.”
“Then I can rest a touch easier. However, if you fail, Fate, then I’ll have no choice. I’ll have to destroy the entirety of Hausen.”
He spoke the words with so little concern that I took a step forward, ready to fight, but I found myself held back by Snow.
“No! It’s dangerous!” she cried.

“She may have lost her memories, but at least she still understands,” said Libra. “But enough talk. Hausen is waiting for you.”
As far as Libra was concerned, the conversation was over, and he strode away. As he passed by once more, he made sure to say one last thing, just loud enough for me to hear.
“You’ll need to get stronger, Fate. But I’ll be waiting.”
And then he was on his way. All that remained in his wake were the ruins of a once prosperous town, now decimated. Eris walked up alongside me and threaded her arm through my own.
“I did my best to stand up to him, but…I need time.”
Her body was cold, and she still trembled. Considering the hurts she carried with her, she’d done more than enough. Most people, when faced with what terrifies them most, could barely even eke out a whisper.
“You did enough, Eris,” I said. “You did more than enough.”
“Thank you…”
Now was not the time to fight Libra. The town was in ruins, but the few people who had chosen to stay had miraculously survived. They were with Roxy and Memil when we met up with them, and I explained everything I could about the monster that had once lurked beneath their town. It was the only way for them to understand that the land was no longer a place that they could call home.
“I’m at least glad that the townspeople understand why they have to leave,” said Roxy later as we jumped on our motorbike.
“Yeah, it’s just funny that it took a gigantic monster crawling out of the earth to finally convince them,” I said.
“It’s human nature. Words can be deceiving, but it’s hard to doubt what you see with your own eyes.”
“And when you feel firsthand a moment that could have ended your life, you look at things in a new light…”
If they were people with money, it wouldn’t be hard to make a new start. But many of them were of the forsaken, and they’d stumbled upon this place as they wandered the lands with no place to call home. They thought they’d found their way to paradise, so it was easy to understand why they were hesitant to leave. But now fear overpowered whatever other feelings they had, and they made the decision to leave.
“People are weak, fragile,” said Roxy. “I’m no different. I’m a holy knight, yes, but that’s only because of my skills. But *you’re* different Fate. You’re strong.”
“It’s hard for me to see myself that way.”
“I’ll never forget the look on your face when you fought the Divine Dragon, Fay. It was filled with determination. Your eyes told me that you would never give up, no matter what. It was the same in the kingdom.”
I laughed. “I think it might just be that I’m stubborn.”
Roxy didn’t find it funny, however, and my answer clearly didn’t satisfy.
“But it’s true!”

“Anyway, at least these people have somewhere to go. LeChoix will give them shelter, and though that’s only temporary, I hope we can welcome them to Hausen in time.”
“The sooner the better, right? Until then, we’ve got a job to do.”
“First we have to search Hausen for signs of Myne. Then make sure the Door to Distant Lands doesn’t open. If we can do that, Hausen will be safe, and we can start taking people in again.”
I revved the motorcycle and started speeding along toward our destination. Snow’s face brightened immediately, like she’d been waiting for a ride at the fair.
“Faster! Faster! Yay!”
“If you don’t hold on, you’ll fall off the bike,” I warned.
“I’m fine!”
Of course she was fine. She was in the Domain of E.
“Let’s see what kind of speed this bike’s really capable of, then.”
“Yay!” Snow cried.
“Fay! Don’t encourage her like that! Your Majesty, please, say something!”
Eris and Memil rode beside us, with Eris driving this time. For a time, she didn’t answer, satisfied just to watch us with a quiet smile.
“Well? Your Majesty?”
“I’m in too good a mood for that!” Eris said finally. “Let him be an immature little kid once in a while.”
“Who are you calling an immature kid?!” I shouted.
But Eris was all radiant smiles in return. I had a feeling her mood was wrapped up in our run-in with Libra. She feared him, but she had finally found the courage to stand up to him. It was a big moment for her, and a step toward overcoming her fears.
Libra said that if we could stop the Door from opening, he wouldn’t have to destroy Hausen. He had his own internal logic for not acting immediately, and if the incident we’d just encountered was any indication, he would grant us at least enough time to try. But once time was up, Libra would get to work and nothing would stop him. It didn’t matter to him that there were people in Hausen; human life wasn’t as important as completing his mission.
“Hey, Eris,” I said, “can I ask you something about Libra?”
“Of course. Don’t feel like you have to tiptoe around the topic.”
“Thanks. I’m curious about the power Libra used. He used it on the City Eater and the thing decayed and rotted right in front of our eyes. What was that?”
“I don’t know it in any great detail, but…on a basic level, he controls life itself.”
Life itself? At first I was perplexed, but when I considered it, the City Eater had acted as if its life force was being drained. If Libra could control that, then his power was near limitless. Eris’s laughter pulled me out of my thoughts.

“Scared, Fate?” she asked.
“Not scared,” I replied, “just thinking about how to fight an enemy who can control such a thing.”
Eris burst into laughter. “Oh, that is so *you*!”
I didn’t really like the way it felt like she was laughing *at* me, but I had to admit it was nice to see her in high spirits again. “Yeah, yeah,” I grumbled. “Laugh it up.”
And she did. Her laughter grew louder and more energetic.
“Knock it off already, Eris!” I shouted.
She really *was* laughing at me! I gave her a piece of my mind as we rode, and before long our destination became visible on the horizon: an old castle on a small hill, surrounded by high walls. The place had once been left to decay over many years, abandoned, but now it was turning into a fine city in its own right. Hausen was reborn.
“Wow, it’s truly picturesque now. The repairs are really coming along,” said Eris.
“It’s like a totally different place compared to the last time I was here,” said Memil.
“So, this is the Barbatos estate!” said Roxy. “I thought you said it was still being rebuilt. It looks amazing from here!”
“We repaired the outer walls first to make sure it was safe from threat of monsters. I told everybody we could save the castle for later, but nobody listened—they said it was the symbol of the estate.”
There was a lot to look forward to behind those walls. There were homes being built and businesses opening up.
“Fate!” cried Snow excitedly, “Hurry up! Let’s go!”
Having helped with the rebuilding of Hausen, it made me happy to see everyone so excited. I put more speed into the bike and headed closer to the city gates. As we neared, we heard the gates begin to open as if to mark our arrival. The soldiers keeping watch had noticed us approaching. A group of soldiers came out of the open gates with a man who waved at us happily.
“Welcome to Hausen, everybody!” he shouted.
“Set! It’s been too long. How are you?”
“Magnificent, now that we’ve got the support of the kingdom behind us,” His face brimmed with confidence. “Take a look for yourself!”
Set and I had reunited at my old village a while back, and though we’d parted ways then, we’d crossed paths again later. Now he was helping with the restoration of Hausen. We had been through a lot together, not all of it good, but we’d put our differences behind us and I was glad to call him a friend.
Set and I clasped hands and I introduced him to the rest of my new party. Set was surprised to see Roxy, who he probably assumed would still be in Seifort. Even though I’d told him about it through letters in the past, his eyes almost popped out of his skull at the sight of Memil in her maid uniform. Then again, she was probably the only former holy knight who

dressed that way. When I introduced Eris, he looked like he was going to leap out of his skin before dropping to his knees before her.
“Your Majesty!” he said. “It is the humblest of honors for your fine presence to grace an estate as lowly as our own!”
“Hey! Since when was Hausen lowly?” I shot back.
“Fate! Know your place! This is the queen! The *queen*! We’re not ready to receive guests of her status!”
“Calm down, Set, it’s fine. She might look like royalty on the outside, but on the inside, she’s anything but.”
“How dare you, Fate!” Eris gripped my ear painfully between her fingers before saying to Set, “Fate’s manners are awful, but there’s some truth to what he’s trying to express. You don’t need to worry, Set. I’m actually awfully curious to see how Hausen is developing.”
“I’m so glad to hear it, Your Majesty!” Judging by Set’s face, he really was relieved. As he rose to his feet, he eyed Snow carefully, like he was trying to put a puzzle together. “No way!” he said finally. “Fate, is this your kid? But if so, then who’s the mother?”
Set’s gaze went from Roxy to Memil and Eris, who each responded with surprise.
“Eh?”
“Oh, my!”
“Ooh!”
Set, what the hell! But also, why didn’t any of the girls bother to clear the air immediately?!
Set looked at us all with a dopey grin on his face. “I see, I see,” he said, not seeing at all.
“Don’t get the wrong idea,” I said. “The little one’s name is Snow. We encountered her at the Lanchester estate and now she’s traveling with us. I can’t say anything more about it here.”
“‘Encountered’ her?” Set said. “In that case, shall we continue this discussion in the castle? We finished renovating the interior just the other day, and we’ve been anxious for you to see it.”
He talked to me so casually. Had he forgotten he was speaking with the head of Hausen? Then again, I *had* told him and everyone else not to bother with rank and hierarchy and to just address me like they would anyone. I suppose it was in keeping with Set’s personality to push at that boundary jokingly.
“Come right this way and I’ll show you to the castle,” said Set. “And by the way, Fate. We’ve got some information on Myne. I assume that’s something to discuss in the castle too?”
“Yes, that’s fine.”
We followed after Set through the gates and into Hausen. Someone had apparently spotted Myne. If so, it meant there was indeed something here in Hausen that she needed to open the Door to Distant Lands, and I had a feeling that if I wanted to stop her, there was no way to avoid a fight.

Side Story:
Dean Graphite

IT HAD BEEN a long time since I'd tasted battle. I'd spent five years resting in the cold soil of my grave, and with that in mind, I didn't perform too badly. But I hadn't intended to fight at all, actually. I only wanted to keep an eye on my son as he fought the Zodiac Scorpion. However, before I knew it, I was in the heat of the fray myself, fighting by his side. It was a steady reminder that once again, I was a father.

I stared up at the moon as I walked the desert, alone.

"So, even Snow is back," I said to myself.

I had expected her return, but not so soon. Fortunately, her resurrection was incomplete, and her memories were lost. We wouldn't have won so easily had she been resurrected in the state she left.

I was the person who'd killed Snow the first time, and she'd dealt the wounds that eventually led to my own death. Because of this dark past, I wanted to rid the world of her, yet Fate hadn't let me. He was kind, just like his mother.

I had no choice but to allow it. If Snow had taken a liking to Fate, then he would have a guardian of unbelievable strength. She shared the same inhuman power that I did, and the thirteen of us who bore this power were known as the Zodiac Knights. When we unleashed the slumbering power of the holy beasts within, we had the fearsome strength of the Domain of E at our disposal.

In the beginning, only the Zodiac Knights had been able to reach the Domain of E and utilize its power. In this way, we could maintain a balance. However, when Libra, the thirteenth knight appeared, this balance began to fall apart. He created minions with the power of the Domain of E, his reasoning being that it would make the world easier to govern. Where he received the knowledge and power to do such a thing was a complete mystery. However, it was effective at bringing an end to the frequent wars that scarred the lands of the world. At the time, my thoughts were not like those of humans, and I didn't concern myself with any lives sacrificed if they were for the sake of balance. Rather, I encouraged their loss. If Fate learned of the person I was then, he would never be able to forgive me.

The person who changed me, the person who transformed my cold, cruel heart, was my wife. She was nothing more than a human—an existence I thought of as almost nothing. Even so, from the moment I first beheld her, my worldview completely shifted. I had lived for countless years, and yet these sudden feelings hit me for the first time and sent shock waves through my core. I couldn't hold them back, and together we created something that never should have been.

Fate was the first of his kind: a child of mixed blood, born from the union of a holy beastfolk and a human.
Knowing that the Zodiac Knights would never permit the existence of such a child, we escaped in search of a place to hide. At the small village where we ended up, my wife gave birth to Fate and died in the process. For the first time in my life, tears fell from my eyes. Her last words carved themselves into my heart.
“Restia,” I said to her, “this time, I’ll make it work. I promise.”
Her last wish became my own, and it remained unchanged. I was bound by my Revelation, but I would strive to do what was needed.
As I climbed to the top of a small sand dune, I heard a young woman’s voice.
“You said that you were only going to observe the battle, but you went out there and helped him anyway. Couldn’t stand to watch Fate in a tight spot?”
There was nothing in my field of vision. I felt no presence and no magical energy around me. I walked toward the direction of the voice and spoke.
“Laine, no more hiding. We talk when I can see you.”
“Oh, sorry. My bad.”
Laine quickly took off the cloak she wore. In an instant, she appeared as if from thin air. As usual, she looked pale, sickly, and sleep deprived. There were dark rings around her eyes.
“I am just in constant awe of this cloak,” she said. “I adore lost Galian tech.”
“Well, I’m glad you like it. Sorry I kept you waiting.”
“Meh, I don’t mind. If Fate died, I’d have no reason to be traveling with you.”
“It makes me proud as a father to know he’s got such good people around him.”
I took the bag Laine had been carrying and hefted it onto my shoulder. We trudged on farther east.
“Let me know if you get tired,” I said, “I don’t mind carrying you if I have to.”
“Don’t mind me—I can handle a little walking.”
It was obvious that exercise had never been her strong suit. She was a researcher through and through.
Noticing my look, Laine glowered. “I’ll have you know that I don’t need my Telepathy to know what you’re thinking!”
“You’re saying you can read my thoughts without a skill… Impressive.”
“My skill means that people’s thoughts and feelings flow through me even when I don’t want them. As such, I’ve grown sensitive to people’s expressions so I can figure out their thoughts without touching them.”
“So that was the reason you opted to follow me without putting up a fight.”
“Precisely. I decided to help you because I knew your request was genuine. And I’d be lying if I said you didn’t intrigue me.” Laine peered at me. We had only traveled together a short time, but her motives were clear as day.
“Because I’m not human?” I asked.

Laine nodded quietly. “Ever since I started running tests on Fate, there’s been a question without an answer. The Gluttony is changing his body, yes, but it was also clear that Gluttony wasn’t the only thing that made him unique. I couldn’t help but wonder…was he even human?”
“I see.”
We came to the eastern border of the desert and arrived at a large pool of quicksand. We stared at it for a time, listening to the sound of the sand as it swirled around the pool.
Laine grinned. “So, the ancient ruins are under here?”
“There’s a giant hollow beneath this point that the sand flows into,” I said. “This phenomenon causes the pool of quicksand you see before you.”
“Well, let’s get to it then.”
Laine reached a hand toward me. From here on out, she’d need my help whether she wanted it or not.
“So obedient all of a sudden. I like this,” I said.
“Don’t treat me like a child, please.”
“How rude of me. My apologies.”
I took her hand in my own, and we dove into the quicksand. Laine was nothing if not a passionate researcher. Her eyes glittered with excitement even as she was about to be swallowed by the quicksand. It was proof that her desire to explore the unknown outweighed any trepidation in her heart.
“You have to hold your breath until we get through,” I said. “Can you do that?”
Laine nodded, and I pulled her in close. The sand enveloped us. Time passed in darkness as we endured the coarse, heavy pressure, drowning in the sound of flowing sands. Then, just like that, our bodies grew light.
“We’re through,” I said. “You can breathe now.”
Laine coughed gently. She’d swallowed some sand on the way down. But when she saw the relics that stretched out beneath us, she forgot her discomfort entirely.
“These ruins… But how? They’re…”
“They’re exactly what you think.”
“They’re still functioning.”
The black buildings lined up in neat rows, protected from the elements here beneath the earth. The outer walls surrounding them shone with red lights at certain intervals.
“Your tongue is going to fall out if you keep your mouth open like that,” I said.
“What are you looking at my mouth for?! Focus on making sure we land safely! That’s your job!”
“No need to worry, but watch it. Not a good idea to wriggle too much while we’re falling through the air.”
It had been a long time, but I hadn’t forgotten how to fly. As we fell, Laine looked at what appeared from my back and raised her voice in surprise for the second time.

“Wings?!”
“These are unique to me,” I explained. “The others each have their own unique differences.”
“You’re like…an angel.”
“Nothing quite as majestic as that,” I said. “Get ready, we’re landing.”
We circled the buildings as we descended toward the floor. Landing softly, I lowered Laine to the ground. As soon as she was on her feet, Laine crouched down to study something.
“What’s wrong?” I asked.
“We’re underground, right? But there’s grass growing from the earth. And it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”
“As you can see, these ruins also produce life-giving illumination. A long, long time ago, this place was isolated from the outside world. All the vegetation is exactly as it was when that isolation occurred.”
“So it’s like a living fossil, is that what you’re saying? There must be others too.”
“There are. But we can’t stand around watching grass grow all day.”
“I will do my best not to get distracted!”
Laine reached out and grabbed an insect that had happened to poke its head out from between blades of grass. As she did, I silently grabbed her by the collar and dragged her toward the ruins.
“Can you save the bug catching for later, please?” I said.
“No need to look so stern. That tattoo that pops up on your face is already scary enough. Why go to the trouble of making it scarier? I’ll behave myself, okay?”
“Good. Then let’s head inside.”
“If the ruins are still functioning as they once did, should we be careful? I’m an unauthorized trespasser, after all. Will that cause any trouble?”
“I can authorize our entry. I might look like a ruffian, but I know my way around these parts.” I put a hand to the gate at the walls, and it silently opened.
“The Seifort military has implemented this technology in a few areas. It allows access to authorized individuals by scanning their body.”
“So the kingdom is already making use of Galian technology. If they’ve come that far, they’ll be able to do much more in the future.”
“You don’t mind us stealing the technology for our own use?”
“On the contrary, I hope they’ll make more use of it. There’s no sin in technology.”
We passed through the open gates and to the relics. The place was still spotless, even after countless years of complete abandonment. It was eerie to think of how little it had changed since the incident. Our footsteps echoed as we walked.
“Hey, can I ask you something?” said Laine.
“What?”

Laine looked on ahead as she walked. “Did Fate inherit a similar power to your own?”
“He didn’t when he was born. Back then, I thought it would remain the case, but I realize now that I was wrong.”
“How so?”
“It wasn’t that he didn’t have it, it was that certain requirements needed to be met before it would reveal itself. I believe this is because human bodies can’t handle the strength of a holy beast. It’s ironic, perhaps, but it’s because his Gluttony skill has strengthened his mind and body that he can now meet those requirements.”
“Fate told me that in Galia, his Gluttony almost broke free entirely, but strangely, it didn’t. Right before it should have, it settled down. Am I right to think that was when the power of the holy beast awakened? Fate believes it was a miracle that he owes to Roxy.”
“Miracles… Well, stranger things have happened. She pulled the final trigger, I think. This allowed for the power of the holy beast to release from Fate’s heart and quieten his Gluttony.”
“So that’s what happened… And that’s why you’re interested in her. You heard my story about Galia, and that detail stuck with you.”
“You watched the battle earlier, then?”
“Well, I was pretty far away, but I used this.”
Laine gave me a sly smile as she showed me a pair of binoculars. I knew she hid in her cloak of invisibility, but I hadn’t realized that she’d done more than that. She looked sleepy and careless, but her personality was the opposite, and she paid sharp attention to every detail.
“You talked to her, didn’t you?” Laine said. “After the battle, just before you left. What did you say to her?”
“Why do you want to know?”
We were walking through a corridor deeper into the relics, but Laine suddenly stood in front of me, blocking the way. “Because I’m curious.”
“Fine. I’ll tell you, but get out of my way.”
“Really? You’ll tell me?”
“I will.”
“Then I’ll do as you ask. Let’s hear it, then.”
Laine had a way of drawing people into her world. I imagined she was just as much of a handful for Fate. I laughed, thinking of the hoops he had to jump through for the women in his life.
Laine raised an eyebrow impatiently. “Well? Spit it out!”
“Relax. There’s no need to rush.”
“It’s in my nature to analyze the things that capture my interest, whatever they are. Hey! Did you just laugh at me?!”
“It’s just your imagination. So, you want to know what I said to Roxy…”
“I do!”
I took a deep breath. “I told her that if she wants to be with Fate, then she needs to be stronger.”

“What does that mean?”
She knew what it meant, she just wanted me to say it.
“Fate’s true power is awakening, and it’s awakening because of her. But if he loses Roxy, the damage to his heart and mind will be enormous. His Gluttony could still lead him to a place of no return.”
“And you want Roxy to be strong in case of that?”
“Yes. She has a strong heart, but she’s not in the Domain of E. I’m glad she’s with him, but things will only become more dangerous from here.”
“Roxy already knows all that, doesn’t she? And she still decided to travel with him despite the dangers.”
“She knows it better than anyone. It’s why I had to tell her myself.”
“To get stronger?”
“Roxy will have to make a choice. Either stay by his side as she is, or take a step into the unknown. If she won’t take that step, she needs to go home.”
But the person most worried about Roxy entering the Domain of E was none other than Fate himself. Laine had told me as much. Not long ago, Fate had faced off against a holy knight by the name of Rafale Vlerick, and in that battle, he’d seen what happens to those who can’t control the power. Having fought that monster, he knew firsthand the risk one took when they played with such abilities. I didn’t think Fate had it in him to ever put Roxy in a situation so dangerous. This was why her decision was paramount.
“I hope it goes the way you want,” said Laine.
“All I can do is leave it to her and take care of what’s within my control.”
We came to a thick, heavy door. It was the entrance to the most important place in the ruins—the entire purpose of this facility. To push research ever onward.
“The security in this place is as tight as it gets. Can you get us through?” asked Laine.
“I used to be pretty important, you know.”
“And now you’re just a suspicious old man who kidnaps young women.”
“I’ve already apologized for that. Getting on a woman’s bad side…I don’t know if there’s anything quite so terrifying. They’ll tell you it doesn’t matter, then one day suddenly bring it back like a weapon. Like they never, ever forget a slight.”
“Coming from a married man, those words have a lot of weight,” said Laine with a giggle. “I guess you must be right.”
She looked like she believed it too. I could only imagine how hard things would be for her future husband.
“Give me a break,” I said.
I put my hand to the door, which slid open after scanning my body. As expected, everything beyond the doors still functioned. The large glass canisters were still lined up, filled with monsters soaking in red liquid, quiet in their slumber.
“This… This is just like Rafale’s research facility,” Memil whispered.

“The biological experiments happened across the land, all of them attempts to copy phenomena from elsewhere. Anyway, we need to head farther in.”
Laine pulled at my sleeve to stop me and pointed toward one of the monsters. “Where did monsters come from, anyway?”
“You’re a smart girl, Laine. But if you’re asking me that question, it’s because you already have an idea of the answer, right?”
“All the same, I want to hear it from you.”
“If I tell you that now, we’ll have a hard time cooperating, so you’ll have to forgive me for keeping the secret.”
“You’re horrible.”
“I won’t deny it. Before I met my wife, there was no other word to describe me.”
Staring at monsters submerged in liquid wasn’t going to change anything. I walked on, and Laine followed close behind. In this place, Galian technology still lived, functioning as it always had. The whole place should have captivated Laine, but she followed me without so much as a glance at the artifacts around her.
We came to a stop in the very center of the facility. The energy source that powered the entire facility was here, and it floated in empty space, emitting a blue light.
“This is what you came for?” Laine asked.
“Yes. In the past there were many, but the vast majority of them are now lost to us. It’s an ether blood crystal. God granted people skills and left behind blood crystals. They are formed from the blood of divinity itself. We call it a miracle stone.”
I walked up to the ether blood crystal and pulled the blood-red stone from my pouch. Laine and the researchers in Seifort had called it a Philosopher’s Stone. It was part of a superorganism that bestowed great power upon those it infected. It could grant them the ability to heal, or even access to the Domain of E. However, because it had a will and consciousness of its own, the chances of the organism successfully bonding with a host were incredibly slim. In the majority of cases, the host’s mind was overtaken, and they were instead forced into the Domain of E. This led to Soul Decay and the birth of a new monster.
“It seems that when you handle the Philosopher’s Stone, it has no effect on you,” said Laine.
“To me, this is little more than a tool. But as you thought, it won’t listen to my commands because it’s sentient. So, we’ll purify it with the power of the ether blood crystal.”
The motes of light falling from the blood crystal touched the Philosopher’s Stone, and its surface began to writhe.
“It’s reacting to the light!”
A face arose from the red crystal, and it let loose an anguished, inhuman scream that echoed through the facility. When the room finally fell silent, I held in my hand a harmless red stone.

“It’s done,” I said. “It went exactly as I thought.”
“What should I do now that you’ve finished up with your…Revelation business?”
Laine pointed; the tattoo across my face had vanished. It was the mark of Divine Revelation. In exchange for the power of the holy beast, my actions were bound by contract. When I did what it asked of me, it released its grasp.
“It’s hard for you, isn’t it? The Revelation.”
“It’s been with me for far longer than you can imagine. I’m used to it. Anyway, let’s do what we came here for.”
I walked toward a console beside the ether blood crystal, which controlled the flow of its energy. This energy was channeled throughout the facility.
“A lot of work was done here,” I said, “but it’s time for this facility and its research to end. I’m going to use the ether blood crystal for my son.”
I typed the shutdown code into the console, sending the order for the entire system to halt processes. Then I tapped in a command to package the crystal and make it easier to carry. A mechanical arm dropped from the ceiling, grabbed the crystal, and placed it in a portable vessel.
“It’s done,” I said. “I need you to look after it for me.”
“But what am I supposed to do with this…energy source?”
“It’s not an energy source. As you just witnessed, it cleansed the Philosopher’s Stone. This ether blood crystal contains the rarefied wisdom of God. I merely pulled forth a small fraction of that power.”
“So, you want me to analyze it…”
“With this,” I said, passing the container to Laine, “your understanding of Galian tech will deepen. Use it to help Fate.”
“I will.” Confusion marred Laine’s features. “But if you wanted to analyze it, surely we could have used this facility? Why shut it all down? Why are we leaving?”
“I have to go to Hausen, and it would be dangerous to leave you here alone. It’s safest for you to continue traveling with me for now.”
“What sort of danger are you talking about?”
“As you saw with the Zodiac Scorpion, the Zodiac Knights don’t share a unified agenda. Each of us is independent, with our own goals and motivations. Though I don’t intend to let any danger befall you, I can’t speak for the others. In particular, Libra…”
“Okay, I get it. Then I’m with you. But you’ve got a place ready, right? A place where I can study and analyze this?”
“Of course. But we should hurry. Without energy, the facility lights will dim and go out. We should get out of here before that happens.”
As we left the room, I looked at the glass cylinders. Now that the facility was shut down, the monsters inside had no life support to rely on, and they dissolved into fragments. As I walked on ahead, I heard Laine’s voice behind me.
“Hey, can I ask one more thing?”

“What?”
“Are you glad you came back to life, Dean?”
“I am,” I said. “Very glad. I could see the man my son grew up to be, and this time…” I took a breath and smiled. “I can finally put an end to things with Libra.”
My return was like one last chance granted by God. I had promised my wife, as I stood crying tears of joy in front of her grave, that I would make the most of it.

Afterword

HEY, EVERYONE, it's Isshiki Ichika here. It's been a while!

The seasons have turned to winter, and the weather has gotten cold. But I prefer winter to summer, so it's something I look forward to. It's looking like a warmer winter, and the snow I'm used to seeing at my Okayama Prefecture home is still a way off.

Thank you for reading Volume 6. As usual for the *Gluttony* series, Fate once again finds himself fighting and adventuring. However, this time, he's got Roxy in the party, and the journey also has its periods of calm between the storms.

Though Fate's always traveled as a pair with Greed, it's finally time for him to travel and adventure with Roxy. When I look back, even though Roxy was always the main heroine of the story, she was never by Fate's side. Even in the fifth volume, the soul swap forced them apart. But look how far they've come; it's taken a while, but they're finally adventuring together.

Add to the party Eris and Memil, and the new character Snow, and Fate's traveling party has really flourished. Well, it's certainly gotten livelier. So much so that Fate can't soak in the bath or even sleep in peace anymore… But all the same, these three girls are integral to the story from here on out.

In the side story, I wrote about things from the perspective of Fate's father, Dean. It was also a chance to hint at the secret of Fate's birth, which Dean himself never told Fate about. It's something I want to reveal along with Dean's past. In the next books, when Fate is made aware of the truth, I want to dig deeper into this.

The manga version is still going, drawn by the talented Daisuke Takino. I really like Fate's expression when he smiles in battle. It makes me think that he truly is Dean's child.

Finally, I really can't express how grateful I am to the people who made this book possible: my editor for their constant support, fame for the excellent illustrations, and everyone else involved.

I'm looking forward to writing to you all again in the next volume. See you there!

Creator Profiles

STORYISSHIKI ICHIKA
Things in the sixth volume get lively, now that Fate’s traveling in a bigger group.

ILLUSTRATIONSFAME
So many games I want to play! So little time…

Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

Sign up for our newsletter!

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter